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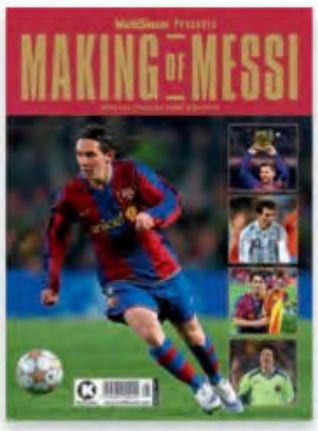

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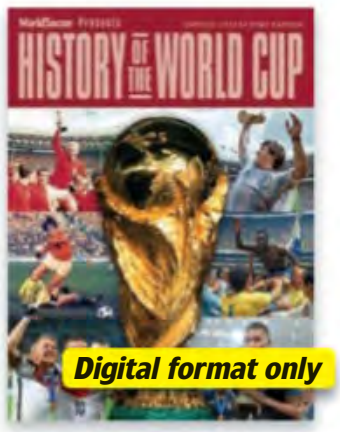

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Contents

IN THIS ISSUE...

In a footballing landscape resistant to change, the introduction of a new UEFA Champions League format has inevitably invited scepticism. Yet it is worth giving the new format a chance. UEFA's last major tweak to the club game was the introduction of the Conference League – which, like the Europa League, has also undergone a makeover this year – and that competition has already given plenty of sides a rare moment in the spotlight and this year will be no different.

In this issue, we've got everything you need to know about the three tournaments, plus plenty more.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

FEATURES

30 Remembering Sven
Henry Winter's touching tribute to Sven-Goran Eriksson

34 UEFA Champions League
Essential guide to the revamped 2024-25 campaign

THE WORLD THIS MONTH
People in the news...on and off the pitch

4 **In pictures**
12 **Henry Winter** The voice of football
14 **Keir Radnedge** Ballon d'Or
16 **Jonathan Wilson** Madrid's Mbappe muddle
17 **On the radar** South American newcomers
18 **Biggest summer transfers**
19 **The month in numbers**
20 **Obituaries** Sol Bamba & Ron Yeats

HEADLINERS
22 **FC Noah**
23 **Larne & The New Saints**
24 **Saud Abdulhamid**
25 **Jamal Lewis & Luis Suarez**

EYEWITNESS
26 **Greece**
30 **Sweden**

2024-25 UEFA COMPETITIONS
34 **Champions League preview**
Features, team profiles & fixtures
56 **Europa League preview**
58 **Conference League preview**

SPOTLIGHT
60 **Angel Gomes**
72 **York United**

FACE TO FACE
64 **Harry Kane**
68 **Ashley Westwood**

LEAGUE FOCUS
76 **Colombia**

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL
78 **2024-25 European season preview**
79 **Alex Morgan farewell**

MY BIGGEST GAME
98 **Martijn Reuser**

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Exclusive subscription offer
See page 10

World Service

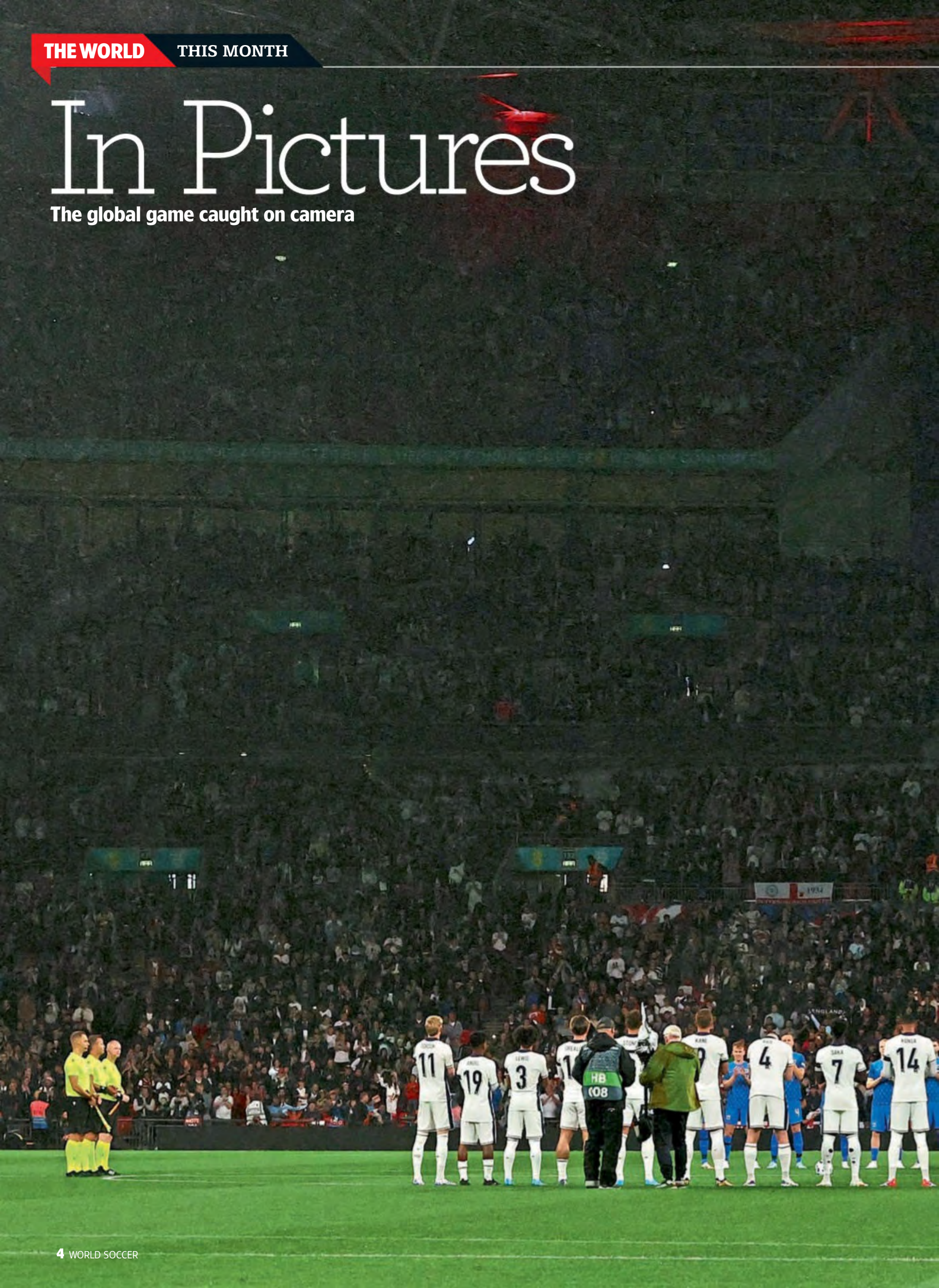
Exclusive reports from our worldwide network of correspondents

82 2024 Leagues Cup
Review of the North American tournament
84 Egypt: Egyptian Premier League
Review of the 2023-24 domestic campaign
86 2026 World Cup qualifiers
Preview of the road to 2026 in Oceania
88 Papua New Guinea
Coaching upheaval ahead of WC qualifiers

PLUS **90 Results, tables, fixtures**

In Pictures

The global game caught on camera



England...Wembley pays tribute to the late Sven-Goran Eriksson before England's UEFA Nations League clash against Finland ***(obituary on page 20 and special tribute on page 30)***

Montenegro...Craig Bellamy is drenched on the touchline whilst overseeing his first victory as Wales manager

Czech Republic...Lille's Thomas Meunier celebrates after his team see off Slavia Prague in qualifying for the Champions League *(full preview on page 34)*

England...Erling Haaland takes home another match ball after scoring his eighth Premier League hat-trick in only his 69th game

Spain...Las Palmas' Scott McKenna tries to slow down Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe during their La Liga clash

Republic of Ireland... England's Jack Grealish celebrates in Dublin after scoring against the country he'd previously represented at youth level

Netherlands...Ajax's 40-year-old keeper Remko Pasveer saves during his side's epic penalty-shootout win over Panathinaikos in Europa League qualifying *(full preview on page 56)*

United States...Columbus Crew's Jacen Russell-Rowe celebrates scoring v LAFC in the final of the Leagues Cup *(more on page 82)*

Colombia...Colo-Colo midfielder Arturo Vidal celebrates after helping his team reach the Copa Libertadores quarter-finals for the first time since 2018, edging out Junior of Barranquilla

Uruguay...*Celeste* fans pay tribute to Luis Suarez during his last-ever international before retiring from national team duty *(more on page 25)*

South Africa...Uganda striker Denis Omedi scores with a thumping long-range effort in his country's AFCON 2025 qualifier against South Africa

Vietnam...Russia's Ivan Oblyakov and Vietnam's Nguyen Hai Long vie for the ball during a friendly. The Russian national team is currently banned from competitive action

South Korea...Palestine goalkeeper Rami Hamada celebrates after keeping a clean sheet in his team's shock 0-0 draw with South Korea in 2026 World Cup qualifying

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Henry WINTER

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

The underappreciated Ashley Cole is a big asset for England

Key coach... Ashley Cole assisted Lee Carsley in September

In all my 30+ years covering England, the player who performed at the most consistently high level was Ashley Cole and yet he is rarely celebrated as one of his country's greatest. It was really only when Cole (and Frank Lampard) were involved in the Wembley honouring of Harry Kane joining England's 100 club in September that many people realised that Cole was himself a centurion and sixth on the list of appearance makers.

Placed between Sir Bobby Charlton and Bobby Moore, Cole walks with giants. Anyone compiling an all-time England or Premier League XI would include him at left-back. He's up with the best left-backs of all time, perhaps not in the top echelon with Paolo Maldini, Roberto Carlos, Nilton Santos, Paul Breitner, Giacinto Facchetti and Ruud Krol, but certainly leading the next wave.

He played in three World Cups and two European Championships. No full-back edged duels with Cristiano Ronaldo as Cole did at Euro 2004 – where he was named in the Team of the Tournament – and the 2006 World Cup. Their meetings in the Premier League were also epic, once leaving the Manchester United winger sitting by the touchline, recipient of another pickpocketing of possession by the Chelsea player, and signalling to be taken off. At Old Trafford in 2006, Cole even gestured he had Ronaldo in his pocket.

Cole was the ultimate modern full-back, a master of timing when tackling and a flier when racing forward. His acrobatic clearances off the line embodied his athleticism and total determination to protect the goal, especially in 2012 en route to the Champions League final. Napoli's Christian Maggio was already celebrating when Cole hooked the ball away. Barcelona's Lionel Messi looked bemused when Cole slid in to steer away Cesc Fabregas' goal-bound shot.

ENGLAND'S 100 CLUB

Peter Shilton	*125 caps*
Wayne Rooney	*120 caps*
David Beckham	*115 caps*
Steven Gerrard	*114 caps*
Bobby Moore	*108 caps*
Ashley Cole	*107 caps*
Bobby Charlton	*106 caps*
Frank Lampard	*106 caps*
Billy Wright	*105 caps*
Harry Kane	*100 caps*

Consistent performer... Cole was named in the Euro 2004 Team of the Tournament

Cole never fully received the respect he deserved with England. Fans didn't warm to him. Too greedy, too self-absorbed and a bit flash, said his critics. Many England fans follow lower-league clubs and have an inherent scepticism about elite clubs, especially Chelsea. Cole had infamously complained about the level of Arsenal's contract offer as a reason behind eventually moving to Chelsea. "When I heard [agent] Jonathan Barnett repeat the figure of £55k, I nearly swerved off the road," he wrote in his 2006 autobiography *My Defence*.

He actually adds in the book that it wasn't about the money, it was more about respect. But the hare was running and the headlines forming. Plus, he'd split with the nation's sweetheart, the popular singer Cheryl Tweedy. He was booed at Wembley for a mistake against Kazakhstan and yet he continued reporting for duty, ignoring the abusers, until retiring before the 2014 World Cup as he didn't want to stand in the way of the emerging Luke Shaw.

Cole's contribution over 13 years was recognised but not with a huge fanfare on his retirement. He'd long fallen out with the media because of what he considered unfair coverage and intrusion into his private life. I tried to organise a rapprochement via Ray Wilkins, coaching him at Chelsea at the time, but a planned coffee fell through amidst a flurry of headlines after he accidentally shot an intern at Cobham, Chelsea's training ground. Yet when a group of us came to help out his Pro Licence media training at St George's Park, and we set up a mock interview with the scenario of him as a manager being tapped up by Chelsea, Cole found it funny and finally opened up.

He's now earning strong reviews for his coaching. He certainly enjoyed good guides himself as he ascended the heights. Nurtured by Arsene Wenger, he developed even more under Jose Mourinho and Carlo Ancelotti. They got the best out of him, whether challenging him or coaching him, and the 43-year-old now applies those skills to the next generation. His one-on-one tuition work with Fikayo Tomori at Derby County and Levi Colwill with the England Under-21s has been lauded.

Now assisting Lee Carsley with the seniors, stepping down from a role with Birmingham City to take a full-time job with the FA, Cole presented England's two recent debut-makers, Morgan Gibbs-White and Angel Gomes, with their first caps. Their appreciation of the honour was deepened by the identity of the man handing the caps. Cole made them realise even more what representing England meant. He praised the hard work they put in on their journeys, the pride they should take and to continue on upwards. "People don't understand the sacrifice you have made, as a little kid, on the streets we played on, you have worked really hard for this," he said to Gibbs-White, before telling Gomes: "If there was one player that I really, really hoped would get this cap it is you."

It remains to be seen whether he wants the politics and public demands of management, but as a coach, and an inspiration to players, Ashley Cole is a winner again.

Placed between Sir Bobby Charlton and Bobby Moore, Cole walks with giants. Anyone compiling an all-time England or Premier League XI would include him at left-back

The hidden depths of Big Dunc

My perception of Duncan Ferguson the footballer was all elbows, headers and hernias – and trouble off the pitch. Reality differs from reputation. Having spent time with Ferguson helping him ghost his life story, I quickly appreciated the humour, humanity and depth of the man. Having also reviewed old Everton matches of his, I was reminded of the deftness as well as power in that left foot.

It was a crying shame that Ferguson played only seven times for Scotland because of a much-publicised falling-out with the Scottish FA. Scotland would have had more of a cutting edge against England at Euro '96 and Brazil at France '98. Ferguson spoke last year of his Scotland boycott as his "biggest football regret".

Ferguson's exile made me reflect on Ben White's decision to snub England, a decision that should be respected but also seems a pity. Whatever the differing causes, regret is an emotion that White might eventually himself feel.

Big Dunc... Ferguson is now in charge of Inverness Caledonian Thistle

Finally...

The most significant fixture of the English season, certainly the most long awaited, has at last kicked off: the Premier League v Manchester City. The truth over whether City breached 115 financial charges, which they deny, will soon emerge, but one truth is already established: the delay has brought the game into disrepute, deepened tribal tensions between clubs, and made the world's most high-profile professional league look amateurish. Football is about players and supporters, not barristers.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The Golden Ball

The history of the Ballon d'Or

Either by design or happy coincidence, the nominees for the 2024 Ballon d'Or were announced by UEFA and French publisher Groupe Amaury on the precise 69th anniversary of the first match in what was the European Champions Cup between Sporting and Partizan Belgrade. A golden thread runs all the way from one event to the other.

On September 4, 1955, the first goal was scored by Sporting's Joao Baptista Martins in front of a 30,000-strong crowd in the Estadio Nacional during a tempestuous 3-3 draw. Partizan won the return 5-2 and went through on aggregate. Coincidentally, neither club were national champions; entries in that inaugural season were by invitation.

The genesis of what is now the Champions League bears exploration. In December 1954 Gabriel Hanot, the old French international who'd become football editor of *L'Equipe*, was outraged by an English newspaper headline that proclaimed: "Wolves, champions of the world," after a midweek floodlit friendly win over the Honved of Ferenc Puskas.

Hanot returned to Paris, wrote a critical diatribe, and suggested that justification of such arrogance should be competitively tested. He set colleague Jacques Ferran to come up with the answer. Ferran duly obliged, on four simple sheets of paper.

Nowadays the creation of a new competition demands years of market research, financial planning, media outreach, sponsorship negotiation and formal launch complete with logo, design, colouration and musical theme. Back then, *L'Equipe* needed a mere nine months between concept and kick-off.

It's not hyperbole to say that the outcome changed the face of football. To capitalise and to promote, *L'Equipe*'s weekly sister magazine, *France Football*, created a prize for the European Footballer of the Year: the Ballon d'Or. This was an innovation: individual awards were rare, with the Footballer of the Year award created in 1948 by the fledgling English Football Writers' Association a trailblazer.

The first winner of both was Stanley Matthews. The European Footballer of the Year swiftly evolved in status and popularity to match the club game's burgeoning internationalisation. In 1995, *France Football* desperately wanted to reward Paris Saint-Germain's George Weah; the trouble was that he was Liberian, not European, hence the opening of the award to all footballers *playing* in Europe.

> To promote the European Cup, *France Football* created a prize for the European Footballer of the Year: the Ballon d'Or

Prestigious...*France Football*'s Ballon d'Or trophy

FIFA had already jumped on the bandwagon in 1990-91 with its own World Player of the Year gong. *France Football* met the competition by dropping the "European Footballer of the Year" idea and promoting the prize, the Ballon d'Or, itself. In 2010, they even joined forces to create the FIFA Ballon d'Or, but neither enjoyed sharing the limelight. Hence, FIFA and Amaury (publisher of *France Football* and *L'Equipe*) went their separate ways again from 2016.

UEFA, under the presidency of former triple winner Michel Platini, sought to reprise the European Footballer of the Year prize but without a similar cachet. Thus, UEFA has now thrown in its lot with Amaury, starting this year.

A constant, incidentally, since 1982 has been the *World Soccer* World Player of the Year accolade. No perpetual rebranding or identity

insecurity, just what it always has been.

The truth is that football's popularity and continual pressure to come up with vehicles for corporate promotion has stuffed the game over-full of awards of one sort or another. This is fun on a fan level, but every new prize diminishes the value of all the rest. In addition, no international tournament is now complete without its Golden Ball plus Golden Shoe plus Golden Glove. No Golden VAR yet but who knows what the future may bring?

Take this year's Ballon d'Or prize list as an example. It features the Men's Ballon d'Or, Women's Ballon d'Or, Kopa Trophy (best Under-21 player), Yashin Trophy (best goalkeeper), Gerd Muller Trophy (top scorer of the previous season), Men's Club of the Year Trophy and Women's Club of the Year Trophy. Tacked on to stretch out the ceremony in Paris on October 28 are trophies for Men's Coach of the Year and Women's Coach of the Year. FIFA's own The Best awards features a similar cast a yard long.

This year's Men's Ballon d'Or shortlist boasts 30 nominees signalling a significant changing of the guard. Out are Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, both absent for the first time since 2003 (when Czech playmaker Pavel Nedved was crowned). Ronaldo, in his self-imposed golden exile in Saudi Arabia with Al Nassr, was already missing last year, when his old Argentinian rival carried off the trophy for a record-extending eighth time. For Messi, not even captaining Argentina to the Copa America was sufficient to keep him in contention. He was also absent in 2022.

Other notable absentees include Kevin De Bruyne, Mohamed Salah, Luka Modric, Rodrygo, Virgil van Dijk, Robert Lewandowski and Angel Di Maria. A further, perhaps more surprising absentee after his Euro 2024 showing, is Jamal Musiala.

Early favourites are Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior and Manchester City's Rodri for their various prize-winning efforts. Vini's Real Madrid team-mate Jude Bellingham has his supporters but less so their new pal Kylian Mbappe. France's captain may surpass them one year but his last season with Paris Saint-Germain was personally fraught and his European Championship was a nightmare.

High-profile awards are all happy grist to the negotiating mill for players' agents. Most stars, politely, smile for the cameras while harbouring mixed emotions. Far preferable, after all, to win the World Cup or European Championship or Copa America rather than individual honours.

2024 Ballon d'Or nominees

Jude Bellingham *(England & Real Madrid)*
Hakan Calhanoglu *(Turkey & Internazionale)*
Dani Carvajal *(Spain & Real Madrid)*
Ruben Dias *(Portugal & Manchester City)*
Artem Dovbyk *(Ukraine & Roma)*
Phil Foden *(England & Manchester City)*
Alex Grimaldo *(Spain & Bayer Leverkusen)*
Erling Haaland *(Norway & Manchester City)*
Mats Hummels *(Germany & Roma)*
Harry Kane *(England & Bayern Munich)*
Toni Kroos *(Germany & Real Madrid)*
Ademola Lookman *(Nigeria & Atalanta)*
Emiliano Martinez *(Argentina & Aston Villa)*
Lautaro Martinez *(Argentina & Internazionale)*
Kylian Mbappe *(France & Real Madrid)*
Martin Odegaard *(Norway & Arsenal)*
Dani Olmo *(Spain & Barcelona)*
Cole Palmer *(England & Chelsea)*
Declan Rice *(England & Arsenal)*
Rodri *(Spain & Manchester City)*
Antonio Rudiger *(Germany & Real Madrid)*
Bukayo Saka *(England & Arsenal)*
William Saliba *(France & Arsenal)*
Federico Valverde *(Uruguay & Real Madrid)*
Vinicius Junior *(Brazil & Real Madrid)*
Vitinha *(Portugal & Paris Saint-Germain)*
Nico Williams *(Spain & Athletic Club)*
Florian Wirtz *(Germany & Bayer Leverkusen)*
Granit Xhaka *(Switzerland & Bayer Leverkusen)*
Lamine Yamal *(Spain & Barcelona)*

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO POMO?

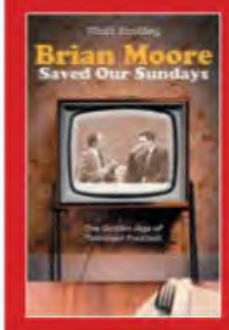
The death of Charles Hughes, at 91, went largely unnoticed in the wider football world. But Hughes was once one of the most controversial men in the English game during his 20-year reign as the FA's director of coaching.

Cause of the opprobrium heaped upon him by much of the media was one casual observation that Brazil "have nothing to teach us." Hughes' reasoning was based on a deduction, from watching hundreds of hours of videos, about the value of swift forward play towards POMO – the "position of maximum opportunities." In fact, Hughes was an advocate of high-tempo football and high pressing and a critic of possession for its own sake.

His theories also drew on the analytical work of Wing Commander Charles Reep whose association with Wolves' long-ball game under Stan Cullis in the late 1950s was anathema to later generations of football sophisticates. "Data", back then, was a dirty word. Hughes must have been amused to see its transition into the altar at which today's coaches and pundits worship.

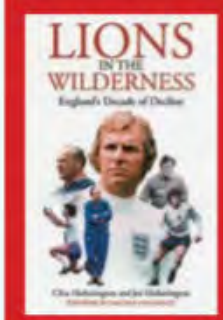
FA director of coaching...Charles Hughes

BOOKS THIS MONTH



BRIAN MOORE SAVED OUR SUNDAYS
By Matt Eastley
(Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Brian Moore Saved Our Sundays is a nostalgic romp through the golden age of regional televised football when the voices of Brian Moore, Hugh Johns, Gerald Sinstadt, Gerry Harrison and others narrated football highlights on tailor-made shows from around the country. This book is packed with interviews and riveting anecdotes, including memories of golden goals, fun-spots, theme tunes and viewers' letters.



LIONS IN THE WILDERNESS
By Clive Hetherington and Joe Hetherington
(Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

Lions in the Wilderness traces the travails of the England team during the '70s, a decade that saw the end of their reign as world champions, momentous managerial upheavals and the Three Lions' failure to appear in another major finals until 1980. On the plus side, there was growing recognition of black players, with many starting to break down the barriers to force their way into the England ranks.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Real Madrid's Mbappe muddle

With so many attacking players to choose from, the European champions have a riddle to solve

Football is not such an easy game as many seem to think. Take a very good team and add a very good player and the result is not necessarily an even better team. The European champions Real Madrid bought Kylian Mbappe and Endrick this summer and yet they went into the September international break four points behind Barcelona.

There's no reason to panic. Madrid are good enough and Barcelona chaotic enough that Real will probably still consider themselves favourites to defend their title. They have already won the UEFA Super Cup this season and while draws away to Mallorca and Las Palmas are less than ideal, they're not disasters. But equally, there will be a recognition that Madrid have to improve on their performances in the first five games of the season.

Part of the problem is that the forward line that fired them to a Champions League and La Liga double last season was extremely well-balanced. Jude Bellingham would drop deep from a central position, which created space for Vinicius Junior from the left and Rodrygo from the right to swoop into. That balance has now gone. Even accepting that Endrick is, at 18, largely there for the experience at the moment, there is a surfeit of forwards. Mbappe is at his best coming in from the left; how can he play with Vinicius who likes to do the same? Even if Mbappe starts centrally, they both want to be cutting inside onto their right foot. Rodrygo is probably the most expendable of last season's front three – at least in terms of celebrity – but he is the only senior forward in the squad who naturally favours the right.

Left-wing clash... how do Mbappe and Vinicius Junior play together?

Rodrygo scored Madrid's goal in their 1-1 draw at Mallorca. The following day, his social media sent out a not especially veiled message: "Last week, they talked about the trio Bellingham, Mbappe and Vini, but to this acronym we will have to add the R for Rodrygo." It was quickly deleted, and local media have reported that the message was put out by the player's communications team not Rodrygo himself, but the message was clear.

> Kylian Mbappe is at his best coming in from the left; how can he play with Vinicius Junior who likes to do the same?

Carlo Ancelotti started Rodrygo in all of those first five games other than the draw at Las Palmas, when Brahim Diaz played on the right. The evidence of the Super Cup win over Atalanta and the opening game of the season is that the Italian coach envisaged a Rodrygo, Mbappe, Vinicius front three with Bellingham to the left of a midfield three with Federico Valverde and Aurelien Tchouameni. The muscular injury suffered by the England man has interrupted that but the evidence of the game at Mallorca was worrying.

Cameras picked up Bellingham saying to his team-mates: "You three, we need to finish the attack, because the running back...is f****** hard."

Mbappe, apparently agreeing, replied: "That's what I'm saying. We have to finish with something."

To which Bellingham said: "Yeah,

Balance required... Rodrygo naturally favours the right

even...create a yard and [shoot]."

It's an intriguing exchange for a number of reasons. Bellingham clearly felt tired, which is understandable enough after the year he's had, but also played into the claims last season that the reason he had been moved to the forward line was because he wasn't fit enough to handle playing in midfield. More specifically, that is not a front three much given to pressing or tracking. That restricts how Madrid can play – to an extent, they're used to that – but it also leaves them vulnerable; if the running is hard against Mallorca, it's going to be a lot harder in the latter stages of the Champions League.

Against Real Valladolid and Las Palmas, the shape was more of a 4-2-3-1, with Arda Guler and, later, Luka Modric playing effectively as a number ten. Against Real Betis, it was back to a 4-3-3 with Dani Ceballos in the Bellingham role on the left of the midfield three. None of it looked especially impressive; it all felt laboured. The positive is that in those first five games Madrid conceded only twice, which perhaps suggests that they are nowhere near as defensively shaky as was feared. On the other hand, they conceded good chances against Atalanta and their opening four league games were relatively gentle.

To an extent, of course, this is just how Real Madrid are. They start slowly and build. They often seem to lack tactical coherence and rely on individual brilliance. Mbappe may not have scored in any of the first four league games – although he took his goal in the Super Cup extremely sharply – but there are few players you'd rather have latching onto a one-on-one. While there are problems, they feel like the sort of problems Madrid are used to; for a long time they've been a club who have defined the modern orthodoxy that matches are about philosophies and ideologies and processes.

Logic says that their present forward line lacks balance; but Real Madrid are accustomed to defying logic with genius.

Jeremia RECOBA

(Nacional, Uruguay)

The son of Alvaro Recoba, the left-footed forward who scored 11 goals in 69 games for Uruguay and won two Serie A titles with Inter, Jeremia has a big name to live up to.

Any hopes he may have had of avoiding comparisons with his old man were rendered impossible by the fact that it was Recoba senior who gave the youngster his professional debut. After Alvaro was promoted from Nacional's reserves to manage the first team in February, father and son made their debuts in the same game. The fact that Jeremia has continued to play a key role in the team despite Alvaro being sacked in July indicates that this was a fully deserved ascension to first-team football rather than a case of nepotism.

The 20-year-old is an attacking midfielder of intelligence and talent, but different from his father – right-footed and bigger of build, robust enough to drive powerfully through midfield.

Born in Italy, he insists that he only wants to play international football for Uruguay.

Jairon CHARCOPA

(LDU Quito, Ecuador)

The 20-year-old forward enjoyed a breakout campaign in the first half of 2024 in Ecuador. Fast and direct, he usually operates on the right wing but is able to play across the frontline.

Tiago CABALLERO

(Nacional, Paraguay)

Rangy 19-year-old striker who showed much promise as an impact substitute off the bench in his debut campaign, and was placed on standby for the Paris Olympics this summer.

Maxloren CASTRO

(Sporting Cristal, Peru)

Elusive little 16-year-old left-winger who made a dramatic impact on debut in February for the Peruvian Apertura runners-up and looks like a really promising talent. Trained with Peru during September's World Cup qualifiers.

Ender ECHENIQUE

(Caracas, Venezuela)

Lively, 20-year-old stocky right-winger who did not look out of his depth in the Copa Libertadores either, on target with a well-taken finish in a losing cause against Rosario.

Tim Vickery

"Unfortunately, following the events with the coach and after much reflection, I have decided not to return to the Belgian national team under his management"

Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois announces that he will not play for Belgium while Domenico Tedesco is coach

THE BIGGEST DEALS OF SUMMER 2024

£64.4m	**Julian ALVAREZ**	*(Manchester City to Atletico Madrid)*
£55m	**Dominic SOLANKE**	*(Bournemouth to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£54m	**Pedro NETO**	*(Wolverhampton Wanderers to Chelsea)*
£52.2m	**Leny YORO**	*(Lille to Manchester United)*
£51m	**Dani OLMO**	*(RB Leipzig to Barcelona)*
£50.6m	**Joao NEVES**	*(Benfica to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£50.5m	**Moussa DIABY**	*(Aston Villa to Al Ittihad)*
£50m	**Amadou ONANA**	*(Everton to Aston Villa)*
£45m	**Michael OLISE**	*(Crystal Palace to Bayern Munich)*
£43.2m	***Teun KOOPMEINERS***	*(Atalanta to Juventus)*
£42.6m	***Desire DOUE***	*(Rennes to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£42.4m	**Douglas LUIZ**	*(Aston Villa to Juventus)*
£42.3m	**Joao PALHINHA**	*(Fulham to Bayern Munich)*
£42.3m	***Manuel UGARTE***	*(Paris Saint-Germain to Manchester United)*
£42m	**Riccardo CALAFIORI**	*(Bologna to Arsenal)*
£42m	***Joao FELIX***	*(Atletico Madrid to Chelsea)*
£40m	**Max KILMAN**	*(Wolverhampton Wanderers to West Ham United)*
£40m	***Georginio RUTTER***	*(Leeds United to Brighton)*
£40m	***Ivan TONEY***	*(Brentford to Al Ahli)*
£38.8m	**ENDRICK**	*(Palmeiras to Real Madrid)*
£38.5m	**Matthijs DE LIGT**	*(Bayern Munich to Manchester United)*
£37.9m	***Mohamed SIMAKAN***	*(RB Leipzig to Al Nassr)*
£37.5m	**Ian MAATSEN**	*(Chelsea to Aston Villa)*
£36.5m	**Joshua ZIRKZEE**	*(Bologna to Manchester United)*
£35m	**Elliot ANDERSON**	*(Newcastle United to Nottingham Forest)*
£34.2m	**Willian PACHO**	*(Eintracht Frankfurt to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£34m	***Conor GALLAGHER***	*(Chelsea to Atletico Madrid)*
£34m	**Emile SMITH ROWE**	*(Arsenal to Fulham)*
£33.8m	***MARCOS LEONARDO***	*(Benfica to Al Hilal)*
£33m	**Yankuba MINTEH**	*(Newcastle United to Brighton)*
£31.7m	***EVANILSON***	*(Porto to Bournemouth)*
£31.5m	***Wilson ODOBERT***	*(Burnley to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£30.8m	**SAVINHO**	*(Troyes to Manchester City)*
£30.1m	**Alessandro BUONGIORNO**	*(Torino to Napoli)*
£30m	***Joachim ANDERSEN***	*(Crystal Palace to Fulham)*
£30m	**Kiernan DEWSBURY-HALL**	*(Leicester City to Chelsea)*
£30m	***Romelu LUKAKU***	*(Chelsea to Napoli)*
£30m	**Igor THIAGO**	*(Club Brugge to Brentford)*
£29.8m	**Alexander SORLOTH**	*(Villarreal to Atletico Madrid)*
£28.1m	**Artem DOVBYK**	*(Girona to Roma)*
£28m	**Lewis HALL**	*(Chelsea to Newcastle United)**
£27.4m	***Mikel MERINO***	*(Real Sociedad to Arsenal)*
£27m	**Niclas FULLKRUG**	*(Borussia Dortmund to West Ham United)*
£27m	**Moussa NIAKHATE**	*(Nottingham Forest to Lyon)*
£27m	**David RAYA**	*(Brentford to Arsenal)**
£26.7m	**Mason GREENWOOD**	*(Manchester United to Marseille)*
£26m	***Matt O'RILEY***	*(Celtic to Brighton)*
£25.7m	**Maximilian BEIER**	*(Hoffenheim to Borussia Dortmund)*
£25.7m	***Scott McTOMINAY***	*(Manchester United to Napoli)*
£25.7m	**Deniz UNDAV**	*(Brighton to Stuttgart)*
£25.6m	***David NERES***	*(Benfica to Napoli)*
£25.6m	**Mats WIEFFER**	*(Feyenoord to Brighton)*
£25.4m	***Ferdi KADIOGLU***	*(Fenerbahce to Brighton)*
£25.4m	**Robin LE NORMAND**	*(Real Sociedad to Atletico Madrid)*

Italicised players denote completed transfers since last issue

**Loan deal turned permanent* *Source: The Guardian*

David NERES

It feels a long time ago now that Neres played a key role in Ajax's shock run to the semi-finals of the 2018-19 Champions League with knockout-round goals against Juventus and Real Madrid. Since then, his career has been marked by bad luck. After injuries saw him slip down the pecking order at the Amsterdam club, he joined Shakhtar Donetsk in January 2022, just weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He never kicked a ball for the Donbas side and joined Benfica that summer. After two seasons in Portugal, he earned his first move to a top-five league, and notched assists off the bench in his first two Serie A matches for Napoli. With the 27-year-old on one wing and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia on the other, plus Romelu Lukaku through the middle, *Gli Azzurri* could thrive.

ANDRE

The defensive midfielder barely missed a minute of Fluminense's run to Copa Libertadores glory in 2023, earning a spot in the Team of the Tournament. It was the prospect of winning that trophy that persuaded the 23-year-old to reject a move to Liverpool, who earmarked the player to fill their void in midfield last summer. Instead, Andre stayed, became a South American champion with the club he had been at since the age of 12, then headed to Saudi Arabia for the Club World Cup where he was named player of the match in the semi-final victory over Egyptian giants Al Ahly. Now he finally has his Premier League chance, and should feel right at home as one of several Portuguese speakers in the Wolves squad. Made his debut as a late substitute in the 1-1 draw with Nottingham Forest in August.

Desire DOUE

Few academies in recent years can claim a record like Rennes'. This decade alone, Eduardo Camavinga (Real Madrid), Mathys Tel (Bayern Munich) and Lesley Ugochukwu (Chelsea) have all left the club for significant fees, while two of their other recent graduates, Georginio Rutter (Brighton) and Sacha Boey (Bayern Munich), have also been the subject of big moves this year. Doue, 19, will line up in PSG's attack with another Rennes graduate in Ousmane Dembele as Luis Enrique builds a side of youth and verve.

Bilal EL KHANNOUSS

Fresh from winning an Olympic bronze medal with Morocco in Paris, where he scored one goal and set up two, the 20-year-old moved to Leicester for a reported £21m fee and arrives in England with plenty of ambition. A shock name in the Atlas Lions' 2022 World Cup squad, where he made his debut in the third-place play-off against Croatia, El Khannouss' progression has been clear to see – he was named both the Belgian league's Young Player of the Season and Genk's Player of the Season last term. For a player who describes himself as an attacking midfielder or winger, and cites fellow Genk graduate Kevin De Bruyne as an influence, his offensive numbers are modest with just three league goals and six assists last season. But the Foxes regard him as a talented player with big potential.

Ferdi KADIOGLU

One of the standout performers from Turkey's impressive run to the Euro 2024 quarter-finals, Kadioglu's signing completed a remarkably lavish summer for Brighton as they passed the £150m mark in terms of net spend, making them one of the biggest-spending clubs in the world. With a total outlay just shy of £200m, only Chelsea spent more. In Kadioglu they've signed a versatile player, capable of playing on either side of the defence or in midfield, who hardly missed a minute as Fenerbahce racked up 99 points in last season's Turkish Super Lig.

"The book is basically closed to him. He knows what I think about this. When you are 26, your main ambition should be sporting, not financial...he could have stayed at Ajax, that's not bad, is it?"

Netherlands boss Ronald Koeman rules out selecting Steven Bergwijn going forward after his move to Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

Silver medallist ...Thierry Henry reached the Olympics final in the summer

4
Matches that Daniel Sousa managed Braga for, before being sacked by the Portuguese side.

5
International matches that Uruguay's Darwin Nunez has been banned for after confronting Colombia fans in the stands at the Copa America.

7
African nations that Tom Saintfiet has led after the Belgian coach left Philippines to take charge of Mali – Gambia, Togo, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Namibia are the others.

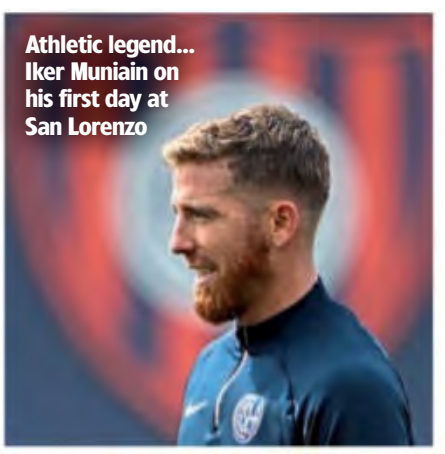
3
League games that Andrea Pirlo managed Sampdoria for this season before being sacked, with the club sitting second-bottom in Serie B.

560
Athletic Club appearances made by Iker Muniain, second on their all-time list, before leaving Bilbao to join Argentine side San Lorenzo.

17
Games that Thierry Henry led the France Under-21s and Under-23s before stepping down from the role in August – almost exactly a year after being appointed.

7
Months that Juan Mata was a free agent for before joining A-League side Western Sydney Wanderers.

900
Career goals scored by Cristiano Ronaldo after he hit the landmark in Portugal's 2-1 win over Croatia.



Athletic legend... Iker Muniain on his first day at San Lorenzo

3
Under-20 Intercontinental Cup finals that have taken place between the youth champions of South America and Europe. In the latest edition, Flamengo beat Olympiacos 2-1 in Rio de Janeiro to lift the trophy.

35
Games that Bayer Leverkusen went unbeaten in the Bundesliga, a run that was finally brought to an end by a 3-2 defeat to RB Leipzig.

Sequence over...Leipzig's Lois Openda scores to end Leverkusen's unbeaten run

£10m
Transfer fee Birmingham City paid Fulham for striker Jay Stansfield, the biggest-ever outlay by an English third-tier club.

€60
Price cap on away ticket prices in this season's Champions League, introduced by UEFA. In the Europa League the figure will be €40, and €20 in the Conference League.

23
Consecutive Premier League seasons that James Milner has competed in, a new record.

28
Minutes that Marco Reus was on the pitch for in his MLS debut for LA Galaxy, in which time he scored one goal and set up another.

Historic...Ali Al Hamadi in action for Ipswich

1
Iraqi players to have appeared in the Premier League after Ipswich Town's Ali Al Hamadi made his top-flight debut. The Middle East nation becomes the 124th country to be represented in the competition.

40
Age that Brazilian winger Willian says he will play to after joining Greek giants Olympiacos on a free transfer from Fulham.

171
Competitive defeats suffered by San Marino – a run that also included five draws – before they finally won their first competitive match, a 1-0 Nations League victory over Liechtenstein.

2027
Year that Mikel Arteta's Arsenal deal will expire after the Gunners manager signed a new contract.

£2.6m
Participation money that Larne and TNS will each receive for qualifying for the Conference League proper.

2
Ex-Chelsea bosses that manage US national teams after Mauricio Pochettino took charge of the men's side to join women's manager Emma Hayes.

"We laughed, we cried and we knew we were saying goodbye. Sven, thank you for always being the person you have always been – passionate, caring, calm and a true gentleman"

Ex-England captain David Beckham on his final meeting with Sven-Goran Eriksson

OBITUARIES

Sven-Goran ERIKSSON
(1948-2024)

After ending his playing career at the age of 27, Eriksson quickly made his name as a manager by sensationally leading IFK Goteburg to the UEFA Cup in 1981-82. That proved the start of a trophy-laden jet-setting career that took him to Benfica, Roma, Fiorentina, back to Benfica, Sampdoria and Lazio, before becoming the England manager in 2001.

In five years, he led the Three Lions at three major tournaments – the 2002 and 2006 World Cups and Euro 2004, reaching the quarter-finals of each. In an era defined by tabloid stories about Sven and his squad, as well as a sense of underachievement for the so-called "Golden Generation", he remained a popular figure among his players.

His post-England career took him to national roles with Mexico, Ivory Coast and the Philippines, three separate jobs in the Chinese Super League, and ambitious big-spending projects with Manchester City, Notts County and Leicester City, before enjoying retirement back home in Sweden.

When it was revealed in January 2024 that he was terminally ill, Eriksson enjoyed something of a farewell tour, taking charge of Liverpool – the club he had supported since childhood – at Anfield in a charity game, and returning to a number of his old clubs to a hero's welcome.

In total, Eriksson won 18 trophies in his career, including the European Cup Winners' Cup and Serie A title with Lazio and three Portuguese league titles with Benfica, whom he also led to the 1990 European Cup final.

Henry Winter tribute on page 30

Farewell tour ...Eriksson on his return to Sampdoria earlier this year, with club chairman Matteo Manfredi and club legend Roberto Mancini

Ronny BORCHERS
(1957-2024)

UEFA Cup winner with Eintracht Frankfurt in 1979-80, who played six times for West Germany between 1978 and 1981.

ADILIO
(1956-2024)

A Flamengo legend, playing over 600 games for the Rio giants, placing him third on their all-time list. Starred in the side that won their first Libertadores in 1981, and then scored against Liverpool in the 3-0 Intercontinental Cup victory later that year in Tokyo.

Stanley TSHABALALA
(1949-2024)

Coach of the first South African team back in world football after FIFA lifted its ban on the country in 1992.

Sol BAMBA
(1985-2024)

After beginning his career in Paris Saint-Germain's youth setup, Bamba made a name for himself in Scotland, making a combined 131 appearances for Dunfermline and Hibernian, where his physicality and tackling ability quickly led to him becoming a cult hero.

After spells with Leicester City, Trabzonspor, Palermo and Leeds United, Bamba joined Cardiff City in 2016 and was named in the 2017-18 PFA Championship Team of the Year before helping the Bluebirds gain an historic promotion to the Premier League in 2018-19.

Internationally Bamba won 46 caps for the Ivory Coast, starting alongside Kolo Toure in defence en route to the final of the 2012 Africa Cup of Nations.

Road to promotion ...Bamba celebrates a win for Cardiff with manager Neil Warnock

Ramiro BLACUT
(1944-2024)

A Bolivia international forward, helping the team win their first and only Copa America in 1963, Blacut made Bayern Munich history as the club's first-ever South American player.

Marc BOURRIER
(1934-2024)

Coach of France's Under-21 side when they were crowned European champions in 1988 and the last coach of the Bernard Tapie era at Marseille. His playing career saw him play over 300 games for Montpellier and Lens.

Tommy CASSIDY
(1950-2024)

Former Newcastle and Northern Ireland midfielder of 24 caps, starring in the 1980 Home Championship success and at the World Cup in Spain two years later.

"Take a walk around my centre-half, gentlemen, he's a colossus!"

Liverpool manager Bill Shankly after unveiling his new signing Ron Yeats to the press in 1961

Christoph DAUM
(1953-2024)
Despite a managerial career that featured trophies and success in Germany, Turkey and Belgium, Daum is perhaps best remembered for his stint at Bayer Leverkusen, whom he led to three second-place finishes in four years, infamously losing the title on the final day of the 1999-2000 season. Before that spell he won league titles at Stuttgart and Besiktas, and after it lifted domestic crowns with Austria Vienna and Fenerbahce, before returning to manage Cologne and Eintracht Frankfurt, eventually retiring after brief spells in charge of Club Brugge, Bursaspor and Romania.

Roy GREAVES
(1947-2024)
Greaves was a mainstay for Bolton Wanderers between 1965 and 1980, making more than 500 appearances and scoring 66 league goals. He later played for Seattle Sounders in the US, before retiring at Rochdale.

PAQUITO Garcia
(1938-2024)
As a player, midfielder Paquito won the European Championship with Spain in 1964 and La Liga with Valencia in 1970-71, before a 30-year managerial career. During the 1990s, he became something of a promotion specialist, leading Racing Santander, Villarreal and Rayo Vallecano into La Liga.

Charles HUGHES
(1933-2024)
One of the biggest influences of English football in the 20th century, Hughes' work as the FA's director of coaching was instrumental in the promotion of direct football at both club and international level.

Willi LEMKE
(1946-2024)
Werder Bremen's long-serving general manager, leading the club between 1981 and 1999, with the Green and Whites winning two Bundesliga titles and three German Cups under his leadership. Alongside his football duties Lemke was also a politician, working for the UN as a special adviser on sport for development and peace.

Number three... Nacional fans pay tribute to Juan Izquierdo

Juan IZQUIERDO
(1997-2024)
A two-time Uruguayan league champion with Montevideo outfits Liverpool and Nacional, the defender collapsed while playing for the latter against Sao Paulo during a Copa Libertadores match and sadly passed away five days later.

George HERD
(1936-2024)
Scotland forward of five caps who played 278 league games for Sunderland and won the Scottish Cup in 1957-58 with Clyde before retiring at Hartlepool.

Humberto MASCHIO
(1933-2024)
An international forward for both Argentina – scoring 12 goals in 12 games and winning the 1957 Copa America – and Italy who he represented at the 1962 World Cup while playing his club football in Serie A. As a player with his hometown club Racing, he formed part of the famous "Angels With Dirty Faces" forward line (a nickname that was used as the title for Jonathan Wilson's history of Argentinian football) before moving across the Atlantic in 1957 to win a *Scudetto* and a Coppa Italia across spells with Bologna, Atalanta, Internazionale and Fiorentina. In 1967, he returned to Racing to win the Copa Libertadores, and lifted the trophy again as the club's manager six years later.

Ahmed REFAAT
(1993-2024)
Egypt international who suffered a heart attack during an Egyptian Premier League match in March. Although discharged, he collapsed again in June and his health sadly deteriorated. A winger who was part of Egypt's winning squad of the 2013 African Under-20 Championship, and played at the 2021 Arab Cup.

Craig SHAKESPEARE
(1963-2024)
After a playing career featuring over 500 Football League appearances for Walsall, Sheffield Wednesday, West Bromwich Albion and Grimsby, Shakespeare is best remembered as a coach. After joining Leicester City as assistant to Nigel Pearson, he remained in his post when Claudio Ranieri took charge and played a key role in the Foxes' stunning Premier League title win in 2015-16. When the Italian was sacked during the following season, Shakespeare was promoted to the top job but only lasted a few months. Later worked as an assistant at Everton, Watford, Aston Villa and Norwich City before returning to Leicester.

Franciszek SMUDA
(1948-2024)
A hugely influential Polish coach, named the country's Coach of the Year on four separate occasions, he led the national team on home soil (co-hosted with Ukraine) at Euro 2012.

Ron YEATS
(1937-2024)
A towering central defender described as a "mountain" and "colossus" by former Liverpool manager Bill Shankly, Yeats was brought to Anfield by his fellow Scot in 1961 and instantly made captain. One of the defining figures in the Reds' history for his role in their success during the 1960s, Yeats skippered the side to the Second Division title and promotion, and then two top-flight titles and an FA Cup.

In total he played 454 games for the Reds – including 417 as captain, a record bettered only by Steven Gerrard – placing him 22nd on the club's all-time appearance list. Coincidentally, the player above him in 21st, Sami Hyypia, was recommended by Yeats in his role as club scout.

Words by Ewan Grady, Mark Gleeson and Jamie Evans

FC Noah

The Conference League debutants from Armenia have packed a lot into their seven-year history

Noah's qualification for the inaugural league phase of the 2024-25 UEFA Conference League is a rapid ascent for a club founded just seven years ago.

Originally known as FC Artsakh – the Armenian word for the former breakaway state of Nagorno-Karabakh, which was invaded by Azerbaijan last year – the club was based out of Armenia's capital Yerevan.

In 2019, the club changed its name to FC Noah after being bought by former politician Karen Abrahamyan and shifted grounds to share with Alashkert. Noah won the Armenian Cup in 2020 to qualify for a maiden European adventure, which ended in the first qualifying round of the Europa League.

At one point, the club's website listed the founder and owner as Bagrat Gazaryan, who worked at Russian construction group Summa. Roman Gevorkyan then became the club's owner as Noah sought to embrace a multi-club ownership (MCO) model.

When Italian club Siena went bust, the club was reformed in 2020 with help from Noah and was readmitted to Serie C. Noah's attentions then turned to Germany and Latvia.

In Germany, Gevorkyan and Noah were hailed as the saviours of KFC Uerdingen after the third-tier club filed for insolvency due to losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2021. Less than six months later, Uerdingen were relegated to Regionalliga West after failing to meet 3.Liga's licensing requirements and Gevorkyan and Noah withdrew.

KFC Uerdingen survived but Latvian club FC Lokomotiv Daugavpils' brush with Noah would later prove terminal. Noah bought Daugavpils in early 2021 and rebranded the club as Noah Jurmala with plans to relocate the club to the resort city of the same name. By March 2021, the Armenians had withdrawn and the club folded that June.

Later, Noah sold the stake in Siena to Italian group Global Service but the MCO aspirations continued with a stake taken in French Ligue 2 club Paris FC in February 2022.

European debutants...Noah's name is revealed at the Conference League draw

Back in Armenia, Noah qualified for Europe again and the inaugural season of UEFA's new Conference League in 2021-22, only to once more exit in the first qualifying round. By the end of that season, the club had left Yerevan for the West Armenian province of Armavir and started playing at the Hakob Tonoyan City Stadium.

In May 2023, Gevorkyan was linked with a bid for English League One side Charlton Athletic. A takeover never materialised and in August 2023, he sold Noah to another associate. "The future vector of the development of Noah FC will be determined by the club's new owner, our long-time friend, businessman, and philanthropist Vardges Vardanyan," said Gervorkyan in a statement.

> Wholesale changes at Noah have finally brought European success

Vardanyan owns the Armenia Wine Company and is president of Digitain, an Armenian-based company offering services to the betting industry.

Wholesale changes at Noah have finally brought European success. The club signed swathes of new players this summer – including former Portugal Under-20 international winger Helder Ferreira from Anorthosis Famagusta and compatriot Goncalo Gregorio from Romania's Dinamo Bucuresti – and under new head coach Rui Mota steamrollered Shkendija from North Macedonia (4-1 on aggregate) and Malta's Sliema Wanderers (7-0 on aggregate) in the first two qualifying rounds of the Conference League.

Historic...Noah new boy Eraldo Cinari in action against Sliema Wanderers during the qualifiers

Greek giants AEK Athens were then stunned 3-2 over two legs before Noah edged out Slovakia's Ruzomberok 4-3 in the play-offs – with Gregorio scoring against both to add to his earlier strike against Shkendija and hat-trick v Sliema – securing Noah's place on the big stage.

With league phase fixtures against Mlada Boleslav, Rapid Vienna, Chelsea, Vikingur Reykjavik, APOEL and TSC Backa Topola to come, Noah will be hoping to make an even bigger splash.

Steve Menary

Larne

Northern Irish champions' meteoric rise continues

When Larne owner Kenny Bruce took over in 2017, European football was nothing more than a distant dream with the club rooted near the bottom of Northern Ireland's second tier and equally struggling off the pitch. Now, that dream is a reality after they became the first Northern Irish club to reach the group phase of a European competition.

Supporters at Inver Park had never seen their team win the NIFL Premiership before 2022-23, but they have now won it back-to-back. The most recent title brought about a meeting with Latvian side RFS in the Champions League first qualifying round. Although they were beaten 7-0 on aggregate, the heavy defeat didn't dampen spirits, especially as Larne had a bye to the Conference League third qualifying round.

There, they met Ballkani, the Kosovan side they'd lost to in the same competition last season. This time, Matty Lusty scored an 89th-minute goal in Pristina before keeper Rohan Ferguson became the hero in the eventual penalty shootout back home at Inver Park.

Ready for a European adventure ...Larne

Qualification was sealed with a 4-3 aggregate win over Lincoln Red Imps, despite losing the first leg in Gibraltar and then going a goal down and a man down in the return tie. An Andy Ryan hat-trick – including two penalties – secured the 3-1 win and sparked rapturous celebrations at Inver Park.

The reward was six more games against European opposition, the most eye-catching of which being the clash with Dubliners Shamrock Rovers. For travelling supporters there will be trips to Norway to take on Molde, Slovenia's Olimpija Ljubljana and Dinamo Minsk in neutral Azerbaijan. At "home", Belfast's Windsor Park – Inver Park does not meet UEFA requirements – will play host to Swiss side St Gallen and Gent of Belgium as well as Rovers.

For Bruce and his chairman Gareth Clements, it is a fitting reward for their holistic approach to developing the club, investing not only in the first team but also in the stadium, training facilities, academy, women's team and community projects.

Manager Tiernan Lynch has been in charge throughout the period of success, and now has the opportunity to test himself on the next stage.

Danny Lewis

The New Saints

The Cymru Premier's first-ever European qualifiers

The New Saints have also become the first team from their league to make the group stage of a UEFA competition, joining Larne in the inaugural league phase of the Conference League.

The Welsh champions, who last term enjoyed an undefeated league season, overcame Panevezys by seeing out a goalless second leg at Park Hall following a 3-0 victory in Lithuania.

TNS had competed in qualifying for both the other UEFA club competitions this summer, losing in the Champions League to Ferencvaros before being narrowly ousted in the Europa League by Moldovan champions Petrocub.

Despite being record 16-time Welsh champions, and thus regular European qualifying participants, TNS had never before managed to successfully reach the main stages of a competition.

Wales' biggest clubs, Cardiff City, Swansea City and Wrexham, have all previously played in Europe, primarily in the old Cup Winners' Cup (despite playing in the English pyramid, all three were invited to compete in the Welsh Cup until 1995). The Swans also made the Europa League in 2013-14 after winning the English League Cup, but TNS' qualification marks the first time that a club from the Cymru Premier, established in 1992, has reached this stage.

Lucrative move ...Brad Young has left TNS for Saudi Arabia

Qualification has not brought universal praise. TNS have a complex relationship with many Welsh fans as their Park Hall stadium is based in the English market town of Oswestry, and there are rumours that their home games – against Astana (Kazakhstan), Djurgarden (Sweden) and Panathinaikos (Greece) – may be moved to nearby Shrewsbury, also in England.

The headline tie is the opener against Fiorentina, Conference League runners-up in both of the last two seasons.

That task was rendered even more difficult by the departure of last season's top scorer Brad Young, who was snapped up by Saudi Pro League's Al Orobah. The 21-year-old, who was released by Aston Villa last year, will play alongside the likes of Kurt Zouma and Cristian Tello at his new club – but he will also miss out on the adventure of a lifetime with his old team.

James Kelly

Saud Abdulhamid

Saudi Arabia right-back goes against the tide by moving to Europe

While Saleh Al Shehri and Salem Al Dawsari took the headlines as they scored the goals that gave Saudi Arabia that famous win over Argentina at the 2022 World Cup, many felt that Saud Abdulhamid was the standout star.

There were rumours that Juventus were interested, but in August the right-back – who can play further up the pitch too – got his big move. It wasn't to Turin but to the Italian capital where Roma reportedly paid around €3 million for the 25-year-old.

Being replaced at Al Hilal by Joao Cancelo is a point of pride, but the bigger deal is that the Jeddah-born international has done something that few of his compatriots have managed: moved to a top European league. It is an ambition that the player has had for a while.

With almost 40 international caps and two Saudi Pro League titles under his belt, the cool defender has what it takes to succeed. He was perhaps the domestic player of the season in 2023-24, playing consistently well as Al Hilal strolled to the title, setting a new world record of 34 consecutive wins along the way.

Playing and training in a team that contains Neymar, Aleksandar Mitrovic, Ruben Neves, Kalidou Koulibaly and Yassine Bounou has certainly helped. The former Al Ittihad player was part of a defence that conceded just 23 times in 34 league games last term, despite facing renowned attackers such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Riyad Mahrez and Karim Benzema. "I've learnt lots from them, they're big stars," Abdulhamid said.

There has been a well-documented and well-oiled pipeline that takes such talent from Europe to Riyadh, Jeddah and elsewhere in the Kingdom, but there are few examples of players going the other way.

Sami Al Jaber, a legend of Asian football who appeared at four World Cups and scored in three, had a five-month loan spell with Wolverhampton Wanderers, then in England's second tier, back in 2000 when he played five games. He has remained a passionate advocate of his compatriots heading overseas. More recently, there was a strange loan deal in 2018 that saw nine Saudi players join clubs in Spain's top two tiers. There wasn't much action to write home to Riyadh about.

Players tend to blame clubs for their lack of travel, saying owners are reluctant to let their local stars go. Clubs say players are too comfortable at home with the kind of large salaries and star treatment that they would not get in the more competitive environment of Europe.

If Abdulhamid can settle and then succeed in Rome – and coach Daniele De Rossi said the player will need time – then perhaps other European clubs will look to the Gulf region for talent but he is not the only hope. A few days after his transfer, Al Ittihad loaned two young internationals, Faisal Al Ghamdi and Marwan Al Sahafi, to Belgian outfit Beerschot, who are newly promoted to the top flight and partly Saudi-owned, for the season. They may not get the same attention but should find it easier to get regular playing time under coach Dirk Kuyt.

Abdulhamid's time in Rome will be more closely followed. "To be honest, being here is such a great achievement from a personal point of view," he said. "I hope I can give it my all here and make all Saudis proud of my performances."

There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia is seen as an important market for European clubs and leagues – in January the country will host the Italian Super Cup for the fifth time – and there may be commercial benefits too. But, ultimately, those benefits can only be maximised if the player performs. Abdulhamid has what it takes to do just that and shine in the Eternal City.

John Duerden

Saudi star... Abdulhamid in action for Al Hilal

> "I hope I can give it my all here and make all Saudis proud of my performances"
>
> **Abdulhamid on his move to Roma**

Famous victory... Abdulhamid tackles Lionel Messi at the 2022 World Cup

Jamal Lewis

Northern Ireland left-back completes unlikely move to Sao Paulo

One of the trends of the latest transfer window was that of increased spending by Brazilian clubs – a consequence of greater financial power, in part a result of the new business model that some clubs have adopted in the past three years.

The giant clubs have spent the last few years trying to bring back Brazilians from Europe either towards the end of their careers or whose moves across the Atlantic haven't worked. This extended to other South Americans – Flamengo's signing of Southampton's Carlos Alcaraz shows they can compete for younger players – and Europeans, although Corinthians' signing of Memphis Depay comes across as the desperation of a big club fighting relegation. Sao Paulo's signing of Newcastle's Jamal Lewis would seem more the product of curiosity, a type of "let's see if this works" transfer.

With Welington to join Southampton in January, Sao Paulo were in the market for a new left-back. They were alerted that Lewis might be available and willing, and the deal – a loan until June 2025 with an option to buy – went through as the window was closing.

Intriguing as it might be, the deal is not unprecedented. Over a century ago, a rumbustious one-time Liverpool centre-forward called Henry Welfare was a smash hit with Fluminense, scoring 165 goals at around a-goal-a-game between 1913 and 1924. In more recent times, London-born Colin Kazim-Richards played for Coritiba and Corinthians, and Yannick Bolasie, so much a Londoner that he is a figure on the grime music scene, is enjoying a storming debut season with Criciuma. But since their international football has been played for Turkey and DR Congo respectively, headlines have been made with Lewis, Luton-born but capped nearly 40 times by Northern Ireland, embarking on a South American adventure.

Northern Ireland international ...Jamal Lewis

And why not? His career has stalled since his impressive Premier League form for Norwich in 2019-20. The move to Newcastle has not proved a success, and he spent last season on loan at Watford. He can only gain experience, and hopefully regain momentum, with a move to a giant club playing in (by far) South America's strongest league.

He made a good start before kicking a ball, going on social media to announce his excitement at joining Sao Paulo, and remarking that he shares the same birthday as the club – good research and even better public relations.

After the September international break, he joined a team not far off the pace in the Brazilian championship title race and preparing for the quarter-finals of the Copa Libertadores.

He can be eased in gently; Welington is still around until the end of the season, so the new signing should not have too much responsibility thrust upon him as he adapts to his new surroundings. But in Brazil's over-cluttered calendar, games come thick and fast. At one point, Lewis was a promising middle-distance runner – experience that could come in handy in the course of the marathon campaign.

Tim Vickery

Luis Suarez

Uruguay legend ends his international career

After 143 caps and a record 69 goals for Uruguay, Luis Suarez played his final game for his country in a 2026 World Cup qualifier versus Paraguay in September. The 37-year-old played the entirety of the 0-0 draw, and almost signed off in style with an acrobatic volley that thumped the post, after receiving a hero's reception before the game. A compilation of his best moments in a blue shirt was screened inside the Estadio Centenario, as the striker tearfully watched on with his family, with a plaque dedicated to him unveiled at the side of the pitch.

"It's a personal decision, totally understandable," said Uruguay boss Marcelo Bielsa of Suarez's retirement.

In an emotional pre-match press conference, in which Suarez fought back tears, he described the 2011 Copa America victory as the highlight of his career, and said that it was a privilege and honour to be his country's record scorer. No other player from that Copa-winning squad is still involved with the national team, so Suarez's departure marks the end of an era for Uruguay.

Tearful...Suarez announces his international retirement during a press conference

The Inter Miami striker is set to continue his club career in MLS for the rest of this season at least. His contract expires at the end of 2024, although the club have a one-year option.

Elsewhere, a number of other high-profile players also stepped down from international football. Manuel Neuer and Ilkay Gundogan both quit Germany, Kieran Trippier confirmed he had played his last game for England, keeper Yann Sommer hung up his Switzerland gloves, and Jonny Evans called time on his Northern Ireland career, while Poland's Wojciech Szczesny quit football entirely after leaving Juventus.

Jamie Evans

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22
7
26
5

Ready to change the face of Greek football ...Athens Kallithea

eyewitness

Alec McQuarrie reports

GREECE

Fashion and football

"Athens Kallithea FC is a love story at its core when you strip everything back."

Ted Philipakos is a football romantic. From poring over glossy football magazines as a child in New York to unwittingly training his brother Peter to become a professional player in their back garden, from the depths of Serie D in Venice to the heady heights of the Greek top flight with Athens Kallithea, Ted has a unique relationship with the beautiful game.

In three-and-a-half years on and off with Venezia FC, Philipakos' work saw the Italian side be described as "the world's most fashionable football club" by *GQ* magazine. And it is not hard to see why. Their jaw-dropping jersey releases were heralded by a slew of five-star reviews and a mad scramble as kit aficionados desperately fought to get their hands on shirts before they sold out.

In February 2023, Philipakos left Venice to become president and creative director of Athens Kallithea, then playing in the Greek second tier. In May, the club returned to the Super League for the first time in 18 years.

But top-flight football is by no means the height of their ambition. AKFC are on a serious mission to stay there, disrupt the status quo and, more importantly, change the face of Greek football for good.

Behind the financial success – Philipakos oversaw a staggering 1,500 per cent growth in commercial revenue in two-and-a-half years at Venezia – there was always an undercurrent of authenticity. In fact, perhaps ironically, it is Philipakos' focus on the soul, the culture, the history of clubs and places from a local perspective that has led to their international recognition.

"I think the prevailing elitism of European football right now is so monotonous and boring and exhausting," Philipakos explains. "I think there's an increased desire to find something new, no matter how humble it is. In fact, the smaller nature of it might be its charm."

This is exactly what prised him away from his work as a professor at New York University focused on branding, marketing and the relationship of sport with culture and society, and sent him across the Atlantic in 2016.

"Almost nobody in my position would have accepted the Venezia FC job," says Philipakos. "I mean, my life was perfectly fine in New York City; I had absolutely no reason to be leaving, certainly not for a fourth-division Italian football club that had been bankrupt three times in the previous ten years."

So why did he take it?

"Because the football romantic in me demanded it, and because I'm very competitive. I understood the potential to build something there and I had a desire to challenge myself and see if we could do it. I certainly found a lot of beauty in this historic but troubled club that just needed some love."

Philipakos became the club's first CEO upon an American ownership group taking over the club out of bankruptcy, and Venezia would achieve back-to-back promotions to Serie B, the second promotion coming with Pippo Inzaghi at the helm. After a brief hiatus, Philipakos returned as their chief brand officer in August 2020, revolutionising the club's image off the field, and witnessing their unexpected promotion to the first division via the play-offs. And though Venezia's stint in the top flight only lasted a season, their spectacular rise from Serie D to Serie A in just five years was nothing short of a miracle – and laid the foundations for them to bounce straight back last season.

"World's most fashionable club" ...Ted Philipakos' kit designs left a lasting impact at Venezia

AKFC's home ...the Grigoris Lamprakis Stadium

"Venezia FC was such a successful project in terms of energising the local fanbase and turning it into something global. And as enjoyable as it was – I took a lot of satisfaction from my work – there was always this slight disconnect because I'm not Italian, and I'm not from Venice. I felt like I had put a bow on what I could achieve at Venezia and it was time to do something else. I shifted my focus to Greece."

But to understand why Philipakos left the city of love for another club that, until very recently, plied its trade in the fourth division, you have to go back to the very beginning.

Philipakos' father was born and raised in Athens but, like many others living under the Junta regime, emigrated to New York as a teenager in 1973, where he met Ted's Greek-Italian mother. Ted and Peter were born in the early 1980s, at a time when European football was accessible only through magazine columns and family trips back to Greece.

Dreams of becoming professional football stars would play out in their back garden for most of their childhood. That was until dreams became reality for Peter.

The American University student went on trial with then 11-time Greek league champions AEK Athens. Peter brushed shoulders with the likes of Theo Zagorakis, Vasilios Tsiartas and Michalis Kapsis, key figures in Greece's incredible victory at Euro 2004 with Greece that very summer.

Financial trouble and coach Dusan Bajevic's contentious move to rivals Olympiacos sent Peter in the same direction, where he would come up against Graeme Souness' Newcastle United on his European debut, and ultimately win a Greek domestic double in a team featuring Rivaldo and Giovanni in attack. Injuries ultimately hampered an Odyssean career in Greece, but Ted was there for it all, as Peter's agent.

The pair are together again at Athens Kallithea FC, with Ted as club president and Peter as vice-president. It took several attempts for Ted to convince Peter to join him but, along with majority shareholder Andrew Barroway, the two siblings have leveraged their respective talents to great effect. Peter acts as a guide for the players given his wealth of experience up and down the Greek football pyramid while Ted, with the help of his brother, manages everything from transfer negotiations to the creative direction of the club, once again honing in on what makes Kallithea special and delivering that identity to its rapidly-expanding fanbase.

> "The prevailing elitism of European football right now is so monotonous and boring and exhausting"
> **Athens Kallithea club president Ted Philipakos**

Club owner... Ted Philipakos

"If you could go back to those kids playing in the backyard, what we're doing now is the wildest dream you could imagine. As I said, Athens Kallithea FC is a love story. It's my love of football, my love of the city and maybe first and foremost, my love for my brother."

But can the pair separate their fraternal from their professional lives and go back to being two children playing football in their parents' garden?

"No," Ted laughs, "because we're too obsessed. This is an obsession. It's not a job and this is our lives, for better or worse."

Their most recent season very much falls into the former category. While they never revealed this publicly, their third campaign with the Athenian club was earmarked for promotion. After two years of finishing runners-up and being denied promotion due to the nature of the second division, Ted and Peter were determined that this time they would be second to none. This is why AKFC's third kit for 2023-24 went from red and blue stripes to a glistening gold all over.

With no room for error, Athens Kallithea, known by their supporters as "City", needed to secure at least a point against title-chasers PAE Chania in their penultimate game of the season to end their 18-year wait for Super League football.

The main stand was bubbling with excitement in the lead up to kick-off. A lot of their so-called "ultras" were not even conceived the last time they

ascended to the first division in 2002. Tourists who had made the pilgrimage to Kallithea's mind-boggling Grigoris Lamprakis Stadium mingled with locals and the stage was set for an historic celebration.

Situated almost exactly one mile southwest of the Acropolis, the Grigoris Lamprakis is breathtaking not for its size, but for its idiosyncrasy. As you look out from the main stand, a wide-shot vista of Athens peels away to the left, peeking from behind a sheer cliff face that gives a gritty backdrop to a squat away stand. Apartment blocks teeter precariously over the rock, and a sweeping curved terrace, reminiscent of an ancient amphitheatre, fills in the corner to the right.

Its unique appearance means it is almost exclusively referred to by its nickname: "El Paso". Built in the 1960s, the former quarry reminded patrons of shots from the Clint Eastwood movie *For a Few Dollars More* and the moniker stuck.

The decider against Chania was not a classic, but it did have a happy ending. Argentinian centre-half Nicolas Marotta picked the perfect match to head home his first goal of the season, cancelling out the gut-wrenching opener from Chania winger Nili Perdomo. And City held out at 1-1 for the remaining hour. Despite more than a couple of close shaves, they had done it.

Dress for success...last term's gold away kit was designed with promotion in mind

A busy summer of transfer activity saw former Marseille and Olympiacos magician Mathieu Valbuena through the door at the age of 39. The club have already pushed through a top-flight restructuring proposal, and urgent renovation to their one-of-a-kind home is well underway. The hope is that Athens Kallithea can continue to be a force for good in the Super League. For that to happen, they need to avoid relegation.

Now the work has truly begun for Philipakos and his team.

eye witness

Henry Winter reports

SWEDEN

Inscrutable, calm, respectful

Memories from the press box of England under the late Sven-Goran Eriksson

Under scrutiny...Eriksson ahead of his first game in charge of England v Spain in February 2001

The voice on the other end of the line was familiar, friendly and gave absolutely no indication of why they were calling. It was Sven-Goran Eriksson, who should have been preparing for the imminent Euro 2004, but was phoning me for some reason instead. The conversation meandered, all very civilised, like tea with a distant relative – we may even have touched on the weather – before finally alighting on something more substantial, namely media coverage of England's qualifying campaign for Portugal.

It slowly dawned on me that I was being gently chided by Eriksson over my critical coverage in the *Daily Telegraph* of his dalliance with Chelsea when he should have been focusing on England. As rollickings go, it was like being savaged by a feather boa rather than a boa constrictor. I've had the hair drier off Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United and a withering dissection of my journalistic abilities by Roy Keane at Ipswich Town; Eriksson's disapproval came wrapped in velvet.

That was Eriksson, the epitome of calm as England manager. We'd just had Kevin Keegan's adrenalin, patriotism and naive tactics. England were a mess, knocked out early from Euro 2000, and their manager resigning in the loos at Wembley just before the old stadium was about to go down the pan. And in came Eriksson, a Volvo in the middle lane of the England hype-way.

I initially found him inscrutable. With England, it felt as if Sven was just a nicely painted front door with little behind. His home during his time as England manager was one of those beautiful Nash houses near the Zoo in Regent's Park, London. I was born 150 yards away, knew the row well, and, finding myself sitting next to Sven at an FA do, regaled him with stories about creatures that had escaped from the zoo and ended up in his garden. The stories were decent, if not exactly told with Peter Ustinov or Peter Kay style, but they didn't register with Sven. He just sat and smiled. It was like trying to tune in to a radio station, we were certainly on different wavelengths. I couldn't get through. Maybe the England job requires a mask. It was really only after he left

England that I got to know Eriksson, a man with far more hinterland than appeared from 2001 to 2006.

He proved great company, and going out to see him at his Sunne home in Sweden was a privilege. He opened up to some of his erstwhile critics, inviting us into his house, greeting us on the doorstep with: "Do you want a hotdog, boys?" He was a genuinely likeable guy, with so much to him: poetry, art, a magnificent furry cat called Meo who adored him, plus Ame his dog who just followed Sven around waiting for a ball to be kicked or thrown.

Talking over coffee, Eriksson spoke of European coaches, like Marcello Lippi, and they were all friends. It's forgotten amid the chaos and circus of England in that era that Eriksson was a major European coach, remarkably well connected. I was reminded of that when he left the national job; he loved the country so much he stayed on – "my passport says Swedish but my home is England" – and eventually reappeared at Manchester City.

All the depth to the man simply wasn't visible with England. There's always a slight adversarial relationship between reporter and England manager. But Sven was always civilised, always polite, if not long on answers. How did he feel about the job? "Very proud." How would he describe Teddy Sheringham? "Very clever." Eriksson was the first England manager a reporter didn't need shorthand for.

We needed a calculator to work out his salary, which intensified the scrutiny. His basic was £1.85 million, rising to £2m from 2002-03. He got £300,000 for qualifying for the 2002 World Cup, and another £100,000 for reaching the quarter-finals (winning it would have brought £500,000). The Euros were less lucrative. Eriksson received £150,000 for qualifying for Euro 2004 and £100,000 for making the quarters.

Five years of hope, heartache, missed penalties, broken bones and dreams defined England on the field

Sven's first game was a friendly against Spain at Villa Park. We asked him how he felt about meeting up with his new squad. "Nervous, curious," he said. "It's like when you meet a new woman. How will it end up?" Sven was dropping clues early. So was his agent, Athole Still, who, when asked by the FA delegation to Lazio what Sven's weakness was, replied: "Women!"

It was true. At one point, Eriksson was asked by the FA whether he was having a fling with the receptionist at Soho Square. "No, but I'd like to," he replied.

His love of life and self-effacing trait endeared him to England's players. When a group were in the masseurs' room enjoying a video making fun of Eriksson, he walked in, watched and joined in the laughter.

The players loved his calm after the Keegan era. Eriksson was so relaxed he had England booked into the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Munich city centre for the seismic 2002 World Cup qualifier with Germany. The players, used to being hidden out of the way, could hear the fans singing outside and for some, like Steven Gerrard, said it made them feel even more fired up. Sven's final team-talk was simple: "I know we can do it." His tactics were slightly more sophisticated than often depicted. Germany were vulnerable on the counter, England had a flier in Michael Owen, so Eriksson instructed Gerrard and others to launch diagonals behind Germany's wing-backs, for Emile Heskey to flick on to Owen. After even Heskey scored, Eriksson sat in the dressing room at the Olympiastadion smiling, Gerrard beseeching him to let himself go. Not Eriksson's style.

Gradually, we became more aware

Finest moment ...England's 5-1 win in Munich

Sunne, Sweden ...Eriksson at his home in Lake Fryken

Captain and coach ...Eriksson with David Beckham

of his character. He could be strong, demanding players behaved respectfully. He left Frank Lampard out after the midfielder upset some American tourists at a Heathrow hotel after 9/11. He could be compassionate. When Gerrard was pictured in the *Daily Mail* having a drink six days before an England game, Eriksson simply said that he didn't expect a 21-year-old to live like a monk, to learn from it, and just concentrate on the game.

Eriksson certainly wasn't living like a monk. On the couple of occasions we had lunch after his England time, Eriksson remained bemused by the English obsession with his love life: "I was single!"

He also never ducked a press conference, even on the day the morning papers were frothing over tittle-tattle that Eriksson insisted on filling the dishwasher before sex. Truly a soap opera. Personally, I was more concerned about his flirting with clubs like Manchester United and Chelsea, as well as the years of hurt continuing.

Given the quality of players he could call on, Eriksson underachieved. Looking back, he would always reflect on fine lines. He'd sigh at the injuries that struck key players at inopportune moments. In 2002, Owen's hamstring went against Denmark in the last 16. He told Eriksson before the Brazil quarter-final that he could only manage a couple of full-on sprints otherwise it will "snap in two". He outsprinted Lucio, scored, but faded.

Mentioning metatarsals could sadden someone even as positive as Eriksson. David Beckham, protecting his healed foot in 2002, leapt out of a tackle with Ronaldinho and Rivaldo scored. Wayne Rooney broke the fifth metatarsal on his right foot against Portugal in 2004 and England lost their best player and one of their penalty-takers. Before the 2006 World Cup, Rooney broke the fourth, this time against Chelsea. He went to Germany lacking sharpness, was wound up by Ricardo Carvalho in Gelsenkirchen and stamped on the Portuguese centre-back. "It was fate," Sven said of Rooney's red card, but the young striker was drained and at risk of lashing out.

Five years of hope, heartache, missed penalties, broken bones and dreams defined England on the field. Eriksson told me he always regretted not taking a psychologist to tournaments. The players needed more relaxation and visualisation techniques for that long journey from the halfway line for the shootout. At Euro 2004, England were poorly prepared. David James dived the wrong way against Deco, Simao and Maniche and asked afterwards why he had not been given any detail on the takers. It's taken until Gareth Southgate came in to address all that.

Over lunch at Skylon in London's South Bank once, Eriksson admitted he should have played 4-3-3 more often than 4-4-2. Smiling, he flipped the debate across the table and asked: "Well, who would you have left out?" Even with the benefit of hindsight, I struggled. England looked best in Germany when Michael Carrick anchored behind Gerrard and Lampard against Ecuador. The memory of Paul Scholes on the left wing at Euro 2004 still sends a shiver down the spine. But Eriksson had a point, who to omit. If he had dropped either Lampard or Gerrard, the headlines would have been toxic. He also had Owen Hargreaves. The midfield balance was rarely right.

He was accused of being in awe of David Beckham, and there was concern when one of the first things he did as England manager was get a shirt signed by Beckham for his daughter, Lina. But a lot of rewriting of history has been done of that era: Beckham was an outstanding, whole-hearted, hugely effective and popular player – and captain – for Eriksson. Eriksson had every right to keep picking Beckham; his form justified it. Their friendship endured right up until Sven's untimely passing.

It took a lot to anger Eriksson. Mainly Sir Alex Ferguson. "You'll have to call and yell at someone else," Eriksson told him down the phone once. But the angriest I ever heard Eriksson was when he let rip about the hacking of his phone – the source, it turned out, of much of the salacious tabloid chat he was subjected to. He couldn't believe people would stoop so low.

Eriksson was big on respect. He had principles. He was very trusting, naively so of the financial adviser who squandered his money. "£10 million," Sven sighed when ringing me, keen for publicity to shame his adviser. Even on that call, the charming, very human Eriksson chatted politely before getting to the point.

Penalty regrets ...Eriksson after the 2006 World Cup quarter-final defeat to Portugal

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2024-25

A New Era

Nick Bidwell explains the newly revamped UEFA Champions League

Revised format...this season's Champions League draw

Holders...Real Madrid are chasing their 16th European crown

Welcome to the brave new world of the 33rd edition of the UEFA Champions League, the extensively revamped meeting place for Europe's top clubs. A competition with more participants (36 instead of 32), more games (an increase from 125 to 189), hopefully more fan appeal and, let's whisper it, greater big-shot solidarity.

After coming to the conclusion that the old first-phase format of eight groups of four teams had passed its sell-by date, a new, revolutionary process will be the order of the day, with all 36 clubs competing in one initial league for the right to progress to the springtime knockout rounds.

In this brand-new Swiss-system league, each club will play eight games, split evenly between home and away fixtures, against eight different teams. To determine one's opponents, teams were ranked in four seeding pots (as has been the case for many a long year) and each side were then drawn to play two opponents from each pot – one at home and one on the road.

Based on the normal three points for a win and one for a draw, the final classification will dictate a club's destiny: further progress, elimination or a place in the repechage. The top eight sides in the league will qualify automatically for the last 16, while those that finish 25th or lower will exit European competition altogether. Unlike past years, no excluded teams from this term's Champions League will have a second chance in the Europa League.

Teams finishing in ninth to 24th will take part in two-legged play-offs for a spot in the last 16. Those who finish between ninth and 16th will be seeded and face one of the teams in the 17th through 24th positions. The seeded sides will have the advantage of playing the second leg on home turf.

If two teams complete the league programme level on points, goal difference and goals scored will come into play. Should another tiebreaker be required, the total points gained by the tied clubs' eight opponents will be tallied, thus giving the nod to the side which had the toughest path.

From the round of 16 onwards, the competition will revert to its traditional two-legged knockout format, albeit with a tennis-style set draw, with a clearly-defined path to the final in Munich.

As usual, the competition began in mid-September. But with two extra matchdays to fit in, the opening league phase will continue until late January 2025. For the last matchday, all 18 matches will be played simultaneously.

The group phase also has been scrapped in the Europa League and Conference League. The Europa League will function with exactly the same new format as the Champions League. The Conference League will start with a single 36-team league too, but will have just six matchdays – three home and three away instead of four of each.

Inevitably, the new formula has its advocates and detractors. Yet what cannot be denied is that the old group stage had become stale, a virtual procession of predictability. With a breakaway European Super League on the agenda of several big clubs, something had to be done to head off the rebel concept at the pass.

The number one attraction of the new-look Champions League will be the increase in glamour ties. A Pot 1 seed was guaranteed to meet two other behemoths from the same grouping (see page 55 for the fixtures). All in all, music to the ears of the top dogs, who should stand to clean up at the box office. What's more, the prospect of going head-to-head with eight opponents should make for an intriguing wind of change.

Such Champions League debutants as Aston Villa, Bologna, Girona, Brest and Slovan Bratislava will love the new system too. Instead of six bites at the cherry, they now have eight.

The one overwhelming drawback, of course, is the makeover's contribution to the ever-growing problem of fixture congestion. Top pros are already under enough strain and the added Champions League workload will only increase the likelihood of more serious injuries.

It could prove especially difficult for those clubs involved in the February play-offs for last-16 berths. They must deal with four extra top-level games, a state of affairs that could, conceivably, be very problematic for sides in Europe's most competitive leagues.

Champions League debutants...Girona are one of five new sides in this year's tournament

Final host... Bayern Munich's Allianz Arena

The exodus from the over-achievers

The squads of four surprise qualifiers for the Champions League have been ransacked, writes ***James Kelly***

The 2023-24 European campaign produced a string of surprising high finishes across the major leagues.

While unbeaten Bundesliga champions Bayer Leverkusen rightly attracted most plaudits in Germany, the feat of runners-up Stuttgart was almost as impressive. In Spain, Girona earned automatic Champions League qualification in only their fourth-ever top-flight campaign, while Bologna finished fifth in Serie A and unfashionable Brest ended third in Ligue 1.

To put their achievements into context, the quartet have all played in their respective countries' second tiers in the past decade. Bologna last graced Serie B in 2014-15, while Brest climbed out of Ligue 2 in 2018-19. Stuttgart finished second in the 2019-20 2.Bundesliga, with Girona playing at the second level of the Spanish pyramid as recently as 2021-22.

All four clubs earned automatic qualification for the expanded Champions League, being rewarded with trips to some of the world's most famed football stadia. Girona, who are embarking on their maiden European season, will travel to the San Siro and Parc des Princes, while Stuttgart will visit Juventus and Real Madrid. Brest also face holders Madrid, alongside a trip to Barcelona, with Bologna taking on Benfica, Borussia Dortmund and Liverpool.

Naturally, players have always aspired to join Europe's biggest sides. In recent seasons strong performers in the Champions League, such as Monaco and Ajax, have been victims of their own success, losing their best talent to elite clubs. But at least they were able to reap the benefits of those talents at the highest level first. In 2016-17, a squad featuring Kylian Mbappe, Bernardo Silva and Fabinho took Monaco to the semi-final stage before moving on to bigger things; two years later, Ajax's homegrown stars Matthijs de Ligt and Frenkie de Jong took their team to the same stage before joining Juventus and Barcelona respectively.

The difference now is that Brest, Bologna, Girona and Stuttgart have all lost their stars before they've even kicked a Champions League ball and, arguably, go into the competition weaker than last season.

All bar Brest have lost their top scorers: Stuttgart's 28-goal striker Serhou Guirassy moved north to Dortmund, while Girona's Artem Dovbyk and Bologna's Joshua Zir zee joined Roma and Manchester United respectively – two clubs not even in

***Pichichi* winner... Artem Dovbyk was the top scorer in La Liga last season**

this season's Champions League.

Meanwhile in defence, Stuttgart have lost half their back four from last season, with Waldemar Anton joining Guirassy at the Westfalenstadion and Hiroki Ito moving to Bayern Munich. Without them, they conceded six goals in their opening two Bundesliga games. Bologna said farewell to shining light and Italy international Riccardo Calafiori, who joined Arsenal, and Lilian Brassier left Brest for Marseille – another club not in this year's Champions League.

It almost prompts the question: why perform well enough to earn a shot in Europe if doing so will only lead to your squad being plundered?

Each club used the loan market to help with last season's success, and have built on that by acquiring some of those players permanently. Stuttgart spent €27m to retain Deniz Undav from Brighton, who scored 18 Bundesliga goals for them last season. Brest re-signed Kamory Doumbia from Reims, while Bologna made Swiss midfielder Remo Freuler – previously loaned from Nottingham Forest – permanent.

However, in other cases loanees have not returned. Girona lost Eric Garcia, Savinho and Yan Couto, who returned to Barcelona, Troyes and Manchester City respectively. Alexis Saelemaekers, on loan at Bologna last season, is now with Dovbyk at Roma, while Martin Satriano (Internazionale) and Billal Brahimi (Nice) both failed to return to Brest.

It is another way in which these sides struggle to bridge the gap to the elite. While they can strengthen with loan signings, they then have to spend big money the following season just to stand still.

While clubs cannot be expected to unsustainably squander big sums, they have moved to try to replace departing stars. Stuttgart also spent €21m on Augsburg striker Ermedin Demirovic, with Bologna forking out €15m for Toulouse forward Thijs Dallinga and Girona splashing a combined €32m on Abel Ruiz (Braga), Bojan Miovski (Aberdeen) and Yaser Asprilla (Watford).

Exit door...Joshua Zirkzee and Thiago Motta both departed Bologna this summer

Although still early days, by the September international break the signs were not encouraging. Bologna were yet to win a Serie A game under new coach Vincenzo Italiano, sitting in 18th place after two 1-1 home draws with Udinese and Empoli to go with a 3-0 defeat at Napoli. By contrast, their departed manager Thiago Motta was unbeaten with Juventus.

Brest, Bologna, Girona and Stuttgart have all lost their stars before they've even kicked a Champions League ball

Stuttgart were also winless, with a 3-1 defeat to Freiburg and 3-3 draw at home to Mainz. It is a similar story for Brest who, while recording a 4-0 victory over newly-promoted Saint-Etienne, lost their opening Ligue 1 game of the new campaign 5-1 at home to Marseille, followed by a 2-0 defeat at ten-man Lens.

Girona are the exception, with two wins over Osasuna and Sevilla, but even then, a 3-0 defeat to Atletico Madrid on the opening day is another ominous sign. The Catalans are in a slightly better position given their ownership by City Football Group, recruiting Champions League experience in the form of Arnaut Danjuma, Donny van de Beek, Pau Lopez and Oriol Romeu.

All four clubs can take hope from Lens last season, who won two group games – against Arsenal and Sevilla – despite losing top scorer Lois Openda and club captain Seko Fofana. Another benefit could be found in dugout stability, with only Bologna losing the coach responsible for working last season's miracles.

However, such is the turnover of personnel, all four clubs have at least nine new players to integrate. With the Champions League now underway, Bologna, Brest, Girona and Stuttgart needed time to come together that they simply didn't have. Amidst the unforgiving territory of the Champions League, the competition's surprise packages could be brought back down to earth very quickly.

On the move... Serhou Guirassy and Waldemar Anton both swapped Stuttgart for Borussia Dortmund

The Favourites

ARSENAL

Time to deliver

Last season, their first Champions League campaign in seven long years, the Gunners would have been satisfied with a last-eight terminus, albeit with an unmistakable sense of regret that they did not do themselves justice in the quarter-final loss to Bayern Munich.

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta can only hope that his charges have fully absorbed the lessons from that 3-2 aggregate loss to the Bavarians: the costly moments of defensive inattention and lack of conviction going forward, an altogether rare occurrence for the North Londoners. When Bayern upped the tempo and intensity in the second half of the second leg at the Allianz Arena, Arsenal's response was surprisingly flat considering the high stakes at play. Arteta suggested after the match that his side still had to acquire the game-management smarts and killer instincts of the European elite, that it could take up to a decade to truly become operational at this level.

False nine... Kai Havertz

Arteta may have a point; his squad is relatively inexperienced. However, we are talking small margins here and in terms of sheer talent, Arsenal have more than enough to push on in Europe.

Where is new signing Riccardo Calafiori likely to line up?

Despite featuring at centre-back for Bologna and Italy, the 22-year-old is expected to be used at left-back, somewhat of a problem position for the Gunners in recent times, with four different players – Oleksandr Zinchenko, Jurrien Timber, Jakub Kiwior and Takehiro Tomiyasu – deployed there last term.

COACH
Mikel Arteta
Now in his fifth full season at Arsenal, the ex-Manchester City assistant wakes at dawn every day with winning on his mind.

KEY MAN
Martin Odegaard
Alarm bells rang at the Emirates after he injured his ankle on Norway duty. The Gunners' skipper is a complete midfielder.

YOUNGSTER
Ethan Nwaneri
Cultured midfielder who became the club's youngest-ever debutant in 2022 aged just 15 years and 181 days.

Do Arsenal suffer from the lack of a genuine centre-forward?

It's an oft-heard argument, though not exactly compelling. Versatility in attack is a fundamental belief for Arteta, who prefers all-purpose forwards that can both create and score. Every player chips in with goals, while false nine Kai Havertz improved immeasurably as last season progressed.

Should star winger Bukayo Saka be rotated more often?

In the latter part of last season, it was clear that Saka, if not running on empty, was far from his sharpest. In the last two seasons alone, the wide-man has racked up over 100 games for club and country. Raheem Sterling's deadline-day signing should help ease the burden somewhat.

MANCHESTER CITY

Pep's final tilt at the trophy?

The history books say that Real Madrid emerged triumphant in two of the last three Champions League editions, yet what has often gone unnoticed is how close Pep Guardiola's side came to outdoing Real's achievements.

City lifted the cup in 2022-23 – their one and only success in the competition – and twice suffered the heartbreak of business-end elimination at the hands of *Los Blancos*: first, conceding three post-90 minute goals in a remarkable semi-final collapse in 2022, and then losing on penalties to Real in last term's quarter-final. Add the shock defeat to Thomas Tuchel's Chelsea in the 2020-21 final and City could easily have won each of the last four continental crowns.

Somehow, some way, they have to find a way to pragmatically seal the deal when it matters most in Europe. It should not take much to rectify. They have one of the best coaching minds in Guardiola, Europe's number one holding midfielder in the form of Rodri, the creativity of Kevin De Bruyne and Phil Foden, and the goals of Erling Haaland.

Hungry for more...City's superstars

In what could be Pep's last season in charge, no one will need any motivating.

Are City automatically weaker without star midfielder Rodri?

That was certainly the case when the Spanish ace missed a couple of Premier League games in October 2023 through suspension, City looking out of sorts and losing to both Wolves and Arsenal. While Mateo Kovacic hardly covered himself in glory at the time, he now appears much more comfortable in that deep midfield role – as proven at the start of this term.

COACH
Pep Guardiola
If this is to be his last year, he would dearly love to sign off with a fourth Champions League crown – only Carlo Ancelotti has more.

KEY MAN
Phil Foden
The England man put in a scintillating shift in the first half of last term when Kevin De Bruyne fell injured.

YOUNGSTER
Savinho
Quick, direct and so elusive, the Brazilian wing wizard should be a sensation in his inaugural Champions League season.

Who could be City's breakout player?

While not exactly over the hill, England's Kyle Walker may well be approaching the point when he faces real competition for the right-back berth from youngster Rico Lewis. Although not the most physical of specimens, Lewis offers so much more going forward, especially bright and inventive coming inside.

Did City make a mistake in allowing Julian Alvarez to join Atletico Madrid?

Quite possibly. Either deputising for striker extraordinaire Haaland or as an impact substitute, the Argentine World Cup winner invariably delivered in his short-time role, contributing 36 goals and 18 assists in two seasons at City.

REAL MADRID

Galacticos 2.0

New *Galactico*...Kylian Mbappe has been added to Real Madrid's frontline

When it comes to the most valuable prize in European club football, *Los Blancos* never seem to lose that insatiable hunger and unshakeable belief. Only a few months after securing their 15th European Cup/Champions League – a proud record which leaves the best of the rest trailing in their wake – the Bernabeu crew already have their sights on further continental dominance, their permanent quest for hegemony underscored by the recent acquisition of France superstar Kylian Mbappe.

A new era of the *Galacticos* should send a shudder of fear through any opponent. In Mbappe, Jude Bellingham and Vinicius Jr, they have an offensive trifecta for the ages and while they will certainly miss the brilliant distribution and tempo-setting qualities of the now retired German midfield general Toni Kroos, the chances are that Real will achieve ample compensation with a beefed-up counter-attacking threat.

As important as their world-class roster and the wiles of much-travelled coach Carlo Ancelotti is Real's steely mentality. Often seemingly on the ropes, only to find a way to hit back and prevail. A priceless attribute.

COACH
Carlo Ancelotti
There's no better manager of elite egos than Carletto, a record five-time Champions League winning coach.

KEY MAN
Kylian Mbappe
This is the moment the glamour boy of the French game has been waiting for for years, a palpable opportunity to strike gold in Europe's premier club competition.

YOUNGSTER
Endrick
Boy wonder Brazilian striker who has been compared to Eden Hazard by Real keeper Thibaut Courtois.

Which area of the team is generating the most concern at the moment?

Undoubtedly central defence. Austria international David Alaba may not be back before 2025 after damaging cruciate ligaments and the ever-trusty Nacho is now playing in the Saudi Pro League with Al Qadsiah. Nacho, at the club for over two decades, appeared in 45 games in all competitions last campaign, deputising for Alaba, Eder Militao and Antonio Rudiger.

How will Real fit Mbappe, Vinicius and Bellingham into a functional system?

How indeed. Early indications are that Carlo Ancelotti will favour a 4-2-3-1 template with Mbappe up top, Vinicius floating with menace from the left, and Bellingham operating as a number ten. Rotation, though, is highly likely; Mbappe prefers to play off the left flank, while Bellingham scored at will as a false nine in the La Liga-Champions League double.

Who could be Real's supersub?

As he proved at Euro 2024, teenage Turkish winger or attacking midfielder Arda Guler is a special talent that can make a big impact. He may even come into his own as a starter on the right flank, taking over from Rodrygo. Yet, with Luka Modric, Brahim Diaz, Eduardo Camavinga, Endrick and Dani Ceballos also in reserve, the depth is frightening.

The Heavyweights

ATLETICO MADRID

Back to Simeone basics

Clearly dissatisfied with fourth place in last season's La Liga – the first time they have slipped out of the top three in Diego Simeone's 13 years as coach – the *Colchoneros* spent the off-season splashing the cash on reinforcements and releasing a number of big earners.

High-profile strikers Alvaro Morata and Memphis Depay both left; Spain centre-back Robin Le Normand was lured away from Real Sociedad, while the attack was boosted by two new faces at considerable expense: Norway striker Alexander Sorloth, who enjoyed the best season of his career with Villarreal last term, and Argentine Julian Alvarez, who left the Etihad for the Metropolitano in a whopping €95 million deal. In a classic Simeone move, energetic Chelsea midfielder Conor Gallagher also arrived – to be instantly nicknamed "pitbull".

One of Simeone's most significant issues in the Champions League will be to get the best out of attacking-third superheroes Alvarez and the veteran French playmaker Antoine Griezmann, 33. If the pair end up on the same wavelength, Atleti will be in business.

Atleti's leaders... Diego Simeone and Antoine Griezmann

Which Atleti player especially needs a strong European campaign?

Griezmann, a genuine world-beating attacking-third chameleon, surprisingly failed to show up at Euro 2024, so unimpressive that he was dropped for France's semi-final loss to Spain. Strange, given that he was Atletico's best player by far last season, scoring 24 goals including six in the Champions League.

COACH

Diego Simeone
In his 13th year at Atleti and on course to displace Real Madrid's Miguel Munoz as Spain's longest-serving coach (16 years).

KEY MAN

Julian Alvarez
A wonderful finisher, he had a successful trial with Real Madrid at the age of 11, only to be thwarted by bureaucracy.

YOUNGSTER

Giuliano Simeone
Son of Diego, the 21-year-old forward is now a permanent member of Atleti's senior squad.

In which area must Atletico improve above all others?

The mean and moody defence, which used to be a red-and-white-striped trademark, morphed into an open door for much of last season, conceding a wholly unacceptable 43 goals in La Liga. The €30m signing of Le Normand, who was so central to Spain's Euro 2024 success, will go some way to battening down the hatches. So would an injury free season for Jose Maria Gimenez.

Who could be their European revelation in the months ahead?

The smart money would be on the 21-year-old academy graduate Pablo Barrios who, after spending most of last season's Champions League on the bench, now appears to be making himself indispensable to Simeone. One of the cornerstones of Spain's gold medallists at the 2024 Paris Olympics, he is a midfielder with limitless stamina, bite in the tackle and outstanding vision.

BAYERN MUNICH

Bounceback needed

Last season was an undeniable disaster for the usually omnipotent Bavarians, finishing third in the Bundesliga after 11 straight titles and going trophyless for the first time since 2011-12.

At the Allianz Arena, such a campaign will always prompt talk of crisis. But it's worth noting that even in the midst of the car crash that was last term, Bayern still reached the Champions League last four and might even have beaten Real Madrid there, denied a late winning goal by a controversial offside call. In both ties, Bayern were very much the equal of Real, proof that they are not a spent force.

Few head coaches in Europe are under more scrutiny than Bayern's new boss Vincent Kompany. Last season, his one and only campaign as a Premier League manager, he could not prevent Burnley's relegation. His only European experience came in failing to reach the Conference League group stage with Anderlecht in 2021-22, and he has never coached in the Champions League.

Welcome to Bayern ...Vincent Kompany with Thomas Muller

How will Bayern play under new coach Vincent Kompany?

Changes and lots of them had to be the order of the day at Bayern after the chaos of last term: the lack of movement, changes of rhythm and creativity, the interminable build-up sequences, and the difficulties when encountering a meaty press. Kompany will be looking for more directness, aggression and intensity, snappier interplay in tight spots and a man-to-man press all over the pitch.

COACH

Vincent Kompany
Bayern are banking on the benefits of Kompany's past as Pep Guardiola's commanding lieutenant.

KEY MAN

Harry Kane
That the England skipper netted 44 goals last season for such a dysfunctional Bayern side speaks for itself.

YOUNGSTER

Aleksandar Pavlovic
The holding midfielder starred last season, and the 20-year-old will be even hungrier after missing Euro 2024 through injury.

Will the signing of Joao Palhinha give Bayern more balance?

The arrival of the Portugal international, a genuine holding midfielder, fills the gap which many – most notably former Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel – were endlessly decrying last term. Palhinha is a high quality enforcer and will provide much needed protection to the backline, especially centre-backs Kim Min-jae and Dayot Upamecano who have looked shaky in recent times.

Do Bayern have a reliability problem in the attacking third?

While Bayern can count on striker Harry Kane and young attacking midfielder Jamal Musiala to deliver, the same cannot be said of others. Winger Kingsley Coman and multi-purpose forward Serge Gnabry have been regularly sidelined by injury, and winger Leroy Sane is just as capable of being world-class as peripheral. The onus is on another new boy, Michael Olise, to step up to the plate.

LIVERPOOL

Life after Klopp

Just as well that the Reds' new head coach Arne Slot is both a confident character and renowned for his abilities as a communicator. Stepping into the Liverpool managerial hot seat is a challenging trial by fire environment at the best of times, but especially so when following an icon like Jurgen Klopp, who stepped down after nine years in May.

Slot, previously in the Eredivisie with AZ and Feyenoord, knows only too well that he has big shoes to fill. Not only did his predecessor win trophies and thrill supporters with his dynamic full-throttle brand of attacking football, Klopp – like the great Bill Shankly – formed a deep connection with the Anfield crowd with his aura and passion.

Not someone who appears to be afraid of ghosts, Slot has wisely set out to be his own man, insisting that his job on Merseyside will be one of evolution rather than radical alterations. Continuity will be the name of the game this term and one of Slot's main tasks will be to oversee the development of the club's numerous young guns, a pool of talent which should benefit enormously from the club's return to the Champions League after a year's absence.

Kop welcome... Slot salutes Anfield

COACH
Arne Slot
Dutch football's Coach of the Year in 2022 and 2023, the second after expertly leading Feyenoord to the Eredivisie title.

KEY MAN
Mohamed Salah
Liverpool's record scorer in Europe, surpassing Steven Gerrard's tally of 42 in 2023 and now closing in on 50.

YOUNGSTER
Harvey Elliott
Diminutive and crafty left-footer adept on the right side or in a box-to-box role, but at his best as a creative number ten.

How does Arne Slot's style of play differ to Jurgen Klopp's?

Slot favours possession-based football – a shift from Klopp's "heavy metal" high-intensity pressing game – with a touch more structure to the way he sets up his team to attack, preferring to use more choreographed patterns of play. Slot is a little less aggressive although, like his predecessor, loves a turnover.

Is striker Darwin Nunez living on borrowed time?

Despite accumulating 18 goals and 13 assists for Liverpool last season, the Uruguay striker generally did not have the best of times, missing many good chances, often offside and ending the campaign on a ten-game goal drought. On his day he is capable of wreaking havoc in opposition defences with his pace and explosiveness, but until he becomes more clinical he will remain behind Mo Salah, Diogo Jota, Luis Diaz and Cody Gakpo in the pecking order.

Could Liverpool's unresolved contracts prove a distraction?

Liverpool began the season with arguably their three most influential outfielders – Trent Alexander-Arnold, Virgil van Dijk and Salah – all in the last year of their contracts. In the case of the latter two, the club hierarchy seem reluctant to offer significant deals to players over 30, while Trent has attracted interest from Real Madrid. Resolutions are needed; replacing all three would be near-impossible, and any kind of "long goodbye" would be hugely unhelpful for Slot and his team.

INTERNAZIONALE

Italy's finest

Wesley Sneijder, the Dutch playmaker at the heart of Inter's last Champions League title, under Jose Mourinho in 2009-10, recently opined that while he was confident of the *Nerazzurri* retaining their Serie A title, he had a feeling they might struggle in the Champions League this term.

Sneijder might be overdoing the pessimism somewhat. Fresh from totally dominating Serie A in 2023-24 – finishing the campaign a colossal 19 points ahead of second-placed city rivals Milan – Inter should not be short of confidence and have several factors in their favour: the tactical shrewdness of coach Simone Inzaghi, a settled line-up that combines collective cohesion and individual game-changers like Turkish playmaker Hakan Calhanoglu, midfield maestro Nicolo Barella and skipper and striker Lautaro Martinez, the top scorer in Serie A last season with 24 goals.

It's also worth remembering that only 16 months ago, the black-and-blues were Champions League runners-up, not a million miles from upsetting Manchester City in the final.

Playmaker... Hakan Calhanoglu

COACH
Simone Inzaghi
Since arriving at the San Siro in 2021, the ex-Lazio striker has re-established Inter as a club of European dimensions.

KEY MAN
Lautaro Martinez
The Argentina front man is already eighth in Inter's all-time scoring charts and continuing to climb.

YOUNGSTER
Yann Bisseck
Legendary ex-Inter and Italy defender Beppe Bergomi rates the 23-year-old German centre-back extremely highly.

What has changed at Inter since US-based investors Oaktree Capital took over as owners this summer from the Chinese Suning Group?

The new name on the title deeds, triggered when Suning defaulted on a €395m debt repayment, has not particularly altered the financial situation at the club. For the past three years, Suning were on an economy drive and Oaktree will continue on that path, insisting on low-cost signings and only buying with outgoing transfer income. Tellingly, Inter's most significant signings of the summer were both free transfers: Poland midfielder Piotr Zielinski (Napoli) and Iran striker Mehdi Taremi (Porto).

Can Inter maintain last season's defensive solidity?

It will be hard to emulate those bank vault efforts, letting in a mere 22 goals in Serie A and only conceding five in six Champions League group phase fixtures. Time waits for no one and in central defence especially, the limbs are creaking a little; see the thirty-something pair of Francesco Acerbi (36) and Stefan de Vrij (32).

Do they have the strength in depth to cope with the extra Champions League workload?

No problems on this score; Inzaghi effectively has two teams of high quality in his squad. New boys Zielinski and Taremi, both class acts, are far from assured of a starting slot, while central midfielder Davide Frattesi and versatile left-footed Brazilian Carlos Augusto are knocking loudly on the first-team door.

The Heavyweights

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

A new and youthful project

Even with Kylian Mbappe firing on all cylinders, Paris Saint-Germain tried and failed to win the Champions League on seven different occasions – so why would they fare any better now their talismanic record scorer has left?

Asked by a journalist who the team's new superstar would be, PSG president Nasser Al Khelaifi replied: "The team." As far as the Parc des Princes decision-makers are concerned, Mbappe simply cannot be replaced, leading to the conclusion that a more collective solution is the best plan.

Al Khelaifi is adamant that coach Luis Enrique, who led Barcelona to the Champions League title in 2014-15, is the man to finally end their sequence of near-misses.

PSG's emphasis on youth in their summer transfer business reflects the new ethos, with the arrivals of prospects like Portugal midfielder Joao Neves, 20, left-winger Desire Doue, 19, and Ecuador centre-back Willian Pacho, 22.

Next Parisian icon...Warren Zaire-Emery

What lessons will PSG take from last season's semi-final loss to Dortmund?

Yes, PSG had the gods against them, hitting the woodwork six times over the course of the 180 minutes, but they only had themselves to blame. They were not only eliminated because of bad luck or a lack of clinical end-product. Surprisingly for a game of such magnitude, the French champions seemed to lack conviction and were far too slow in shifting into attacking high gear in transitions.

COACH
Luis Enrique
The Asturian is as single-minded as a coach as he was when starring for Real Madrid and Barcelona.

KEY MAN
Vitinha
The all-action midfielder has developed into a hugely influential PSG standard-bearer.

YOUNGSTER
Joao Neves
PSG recently paid Benfica €60m for the midfielder's intelligence, pressing game, energy and creativity.

With Mbappe gone, do the Parisians boast sufficient firepower?

Any team that loses a 40-goal-a-season forward will, inevitably, suffer. But Mbappe's exit was compounded by Portugal striker Goncalo Ramos damaging an ankle in the opening game of the season, keeping him out until November. The injury could not have come at a worse time and while his back-up Randal Kolo Muani is no mean finisher, he can blow hot and cold. Wingers Ousmane Dembele and Bradley Barcola need to up their strike-rate too.

Can PSG prosper with so many kids?

Luis Enrique certainly thinks so. On the opening day of the Ligue 1 campaign, he fielded PSG's youngest-ever starting line-up (average age 22 years and 182 days) in a 4-1 victory away to Le Havre. Enrique had no hesitation, for example, in throwing full-back Yoram Zague, 18, and 16-year-old French winger Ibrahim Mbaye right in at the deep end.

BORUSSIA DORTMUND

Runners-up re-booted

Dortmund's unexpected appearance in last season's Champions League final, where they gave Real Madrid an almighty fright before succumbing late on, now seems to be something of a check-point between past and future.

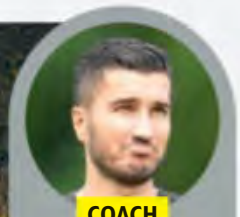
Since that gallant defeat at Wembley there has been change at all levels, with former midfield star Lars Ricken – who famously scored in Dortmund's victory over Juventus in the 1997 Champions League final – setting into his new role as managing director, ex-club playmaker Nuri Sahin taking over from Edin Terzic as head coach, and iconic players Mats Hummels and Marco Reus both being allowed to leave on free transfers.

That's a revolution in anyone's book, though probably necessary; at the same time as the *Schwarz-Gelben* were beating the likes of Newcastle, Milan, PSV, Atletico Madrid and PSG last term, domestically they rarely convinced, more than a little fortunate to secure a fifth-place finish in the Bundesliga.

Atmospheric... Dortmund's Yellow Wall

Was it wise to allow striker Niclas Fullkrug to leave for West Ham?

As far as the the Dortmund bean-counters were concerned, an offer of £27m for a 31-year-old was simply too good to turn down. But the team will certainly miss the burly target man, a player of huge physical presence with a knack of putting the ball in the net at crucial moments. Yet in replacing him, Dortmund have recruited well: Serhou Guirassy scored 28 goals in Stuttgart's surprising second-place finish in last season's Bundesliga, while 21-year-old forward Maximilian Beier fired Hoffenheim into the European spots with 16 goals.



COACH
Nuri Sahin
The Champions League is not unfamiliar territory for the former Dortmund and Real Madrid playmaker.

KEY MAN
Gregor Kobel
Exceptional Swiss goalkeeper, whose chief assets are his massive presence, shot-stopping ability and consistency.

YOUNGSTER
Jamie Bynoe-Gittens
England U21 winger who Sahin describes as being "brutal" in one-v-one situations.

Is Pascal Gross, signed from Brighton, the answer in Dortmund's midfield?

Dortmund certainly needed someone in the middle of the park to efficiently pull the strings, take care of possession and pass through the opposition press. Gross has the technical ability, intelligence and vision to more than fill that brief – the only concern is his injury record.

Can new coach Nuri Sahin hit the ground running this term?

During a spell in charge of unfashionable Turkish side Antalyaspor, Sahin showed a great deal of technical area potential. But he has never coached in a top European league and has lost many of last season's Champions League aces: Fullkrug, Reus, Hummels, Jadon Sancho and Ian Maatsen. This season will be a big test for him.

BARCELONA

Big problems yet bigger dreams

"From my first day here, I've felt the passion of the fans," gushed incoming Barca coach Hansi Flick on arriving in the Catalan metropolis. But, as the former Bayern Munich and Germany boss knows only too well, such emotional outpourings for the game can quickly turn to supporter frustration and discontent.

Expectations are rarely contained or managed in these parts and in Europe particularly, Flick, who won the Champions League with Bayern in 2019-20, is under severe pressure to deliver. For a club of Barcelona's global stature, only one quarter-final appearance in the last four campaigns is an embarrassment. Compared to the all-conquering Pep Guardiola reign of a decade-and-a-half ago, the club has slumped into soap opera territory.

Still hampered by a bright red balance sheet and forced by the redevelopment of the Camp Nou to continue hosting games at the Montjuic Olympic stadium this autumn, the challenges facing Flick are clear. And just to make his task even harder, central defender Ronald Araujo and midfield starlet Gavi will miss the first few months of the season with hamstring and ACL injuries respectively.

Top talent... Lamine Yamal

Why did Ilkay Gundogan only last 12 months at Barca before returning to Manchester City in August?

Club president Joan Laporta has said that Gundogan's departure was for sporting reasons, but for cash-strapped Barca it undoubtedly also provided an opportunity to remove a big earner from the wage bill. New signing Dani Olmo, the former RB Leipzig attacking midfielder, was only registered after Gundogan's exit, and the Spaniard's arrival would also have reduced Gundogan's chances of regular football.

COACH

Hansi Flick
Barca have wanted the German ever since they lost 8-2 to his Bayern side in the 2020 Champions League quarter-final.

KEY MAN

Lamine Yamal
Expectations of the teenage winger will be sky-high after his starring role in Spain's triumph at Euro 2024.

YOUNGSTER

Pau Cubarsi
Highly talented centre-back who last season became the youngest player in a Champions League quarter-final.

Could we see a rejuvenated Robert Lewandowski at the point of attack?

It's true to say that the Poland striker, 36, was mightily relieved to see Flick take over as Barca coach. There were rumours – before he himself left the club – that former boss Xavi was willing to offload Lewandowski to the Saudi Pro League. By way of contrast, Flick, who coached the striker for two years at Bayern, is a massive fan of the Pole.

Is "Made in La Masia" set to become a trend this season?

With insufficient funds for transfer decadence, an inevitable consequence is more first-team chances for academy graduates. Barca's line-up for their first La Liga fixture of the season featured a swathe of locally-produced young talents: centre-back Pau Cubarsi, midfielders Marc Casado and Marc Bernal and, of course, Euro 2024 sensation Lamine Yamal. But the club must be cautious – Bernal too has since been struck down by the ACL curse, so they will need to carefully manage youngsters' minutes.

JUVENTUS

Motta bene?

To say this is a vital campaign for Juve would be an obvious understatement. After four years without a Serie A title and repeated slim pickings in the Champions League – just three appearances in the final this century (runners-up to Milan in 2002-03, Barcelona in 2014-15 and Real Madrid in 2016-17) – the Old Lady, once a by-word for untrammelled power and influence, desperately needs to reburnish her credentials.

Banned from last season's Europa Conference League for breaching UEFA's Financial Fair Play rules, Juve will be simply itching to once again go head-to-head with great and the good of the continent. As six-time winners of European competitions, including two triumphs in the Champions League, Juventus see themselves as a brand comparable to the likes of a Real Madrid or a Manchester United.

The challenge now is to live up to the history and, to spark the hoped-for renaissance, they recently handed the coaching reins to former Italy midfielder Thiago Motta who, over the last two seasons, transformed Bologna from also-rans into much-praised Champions League qualifiers.

Juve's new boss ...Thiago Motta

How inflated are the expectations of Thiago Motta at Juventus?

As one of the brightest, most innovative young coaches in Europe, the Brazil-born Italian has set the bar very high indeed. Already there is talk of him instantly bringing back the Juve glory days, not only securing silverware for the *Bianconeri*, but also making Juve fun to watch again after the dour defence-minded tendencies of his predecessor Max Allegri. That's a lot to ask of a coach whose European experience stretches to one match in charge of PSG's U19s in the 2018-19 UEFA Youth League.

COACH

Thiago Motta
The former Barca and PSG midfielder has come a long way since lasting only ten games as Genoa coach in 2019.

KEY MAN

Kenan Yildiz
The teenage Turk can and must be Juve's number ten this season. Lights up proceedings with his inventiveness.

YOUNGSTER

Samuel Mbangula
A surprise selection on the left wing in Juve's opening game of the season, the 20-year-old Belgian is a big talent.

Which players have been brought in to help bolster the squad?

In his second season as technical director, Cristiano Giuntoli has had a busy summer. At the back, goalkeeper Michele Di Gregorio, on loan from Monza, is the new man between the sticks with Colombian left-back Juan Cabal joining from Verona. The midfield has had a serious injeciton of dynamism from Douglas Luiz (Aston Villa), Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta) and young Frenchman Khephren Thuram (Nice), while loan signings Francisco Conceicao (Porto) and Nico Gonzalez (Fiorentina) will replace the flair lost by Federico Chiesa's departure for Liverpool.

Of the current squad, who has the most to prove in the months ahead?

Serbia striker Dusan Vlahovic cost €80m when signed from Fiorentina in early 2022 but has, for the most part, not looked worth the outlay. That said, he has been living off scraps in a rather pedestrian attacking system.

The Dark Horses

BAYER LEVERKUSEN

Another Alonso masterclass?

In the ambitious world of Leverkusen's brilliant young boss Xabi Alonso, football is all about the next frontier. So much for the sensational achievements of last season – the first Bundesliga title in the club's history and going unbeaten in the process; the DFB-Pokal Cup win and a silver medal in the Europa League – what matters to the Spanish boss is building on that incredible platform, not complacently sitting back and basking in past glories.

Motivation certainly won't be a problem in Europe this term. Leverkusen have not qualified for the knockout phase of the Champions League since 2016-17 (beaten in the last 16 by Atletico Madrid) and all at the BayArena will be champing at the bit to go even further and become an elite continental outfit.

Their 3-0 defeat to Atalanta in last term's Europa League final will also help to maintain focus. That defeat in Dublin still stings, and a positive outcome in the Champions League is the ideal way to get it out of their system.

On the march... Bayer Leverkusen

How does Leverkusen's current squad compare to last season's?

Apart from the departure of on-loan defender Josip Stanisic – who returned to Bayern Munich – the Rhinelander managed to retain all the other fairy-tale heroes. Even Germany centre-back Jonathan Tah eventually stayed put, despite interest from Bayern who, according to reports, agreed terms with the defender only to pull out of the deal – much to the irritation of Leverkusen.

COACH
Xabi Alonso
Excellent in his teaching methods, man-management and tactical options, he has changed the entire football culture here.

KEY MAN
Granit Xhaka
The outstanding Swiss midfielder embodies the side's never-say-die spirit, boldness and smart distribution.

YOUNGSTER
Jeanuel Belocian
19-year-old left-back or centre-back signed from Rennes earlier this summer. A snip at €15m.

Will opponents copy the tactical approach of Atalanta which led to Leverkusen's only defeat of 2023-24?

It would be amazing if no one employed the anti-Leverkusen plan of Atalanta boss Gian Piero Gasperini, namely the aggressive man-to-man press which completely unsettled Xabi Alonso's charges. Atalanta's high-intensity pressure on the ball forced the *Werkself* into rushed passes, thus preparing the ground for rapid counter-attacks.

Is Xabi Alonso likely to introduce any changes to his playing system?

Now that the element of surprise no longer applies, Alonso is sure to come up with a few wrinkles to his dynamic and flexible playbook. These might involve more use of a false nine and modifications to the way key wide-men Alex Grimaldo and Jeremie Frimpong are utilised. For the most part, it will be the same mix of *gegenpressing*, patient possession and fast counters.

SPORTING

Amorim's dream team

Portugal's reigning champions seem in a strong position to make Champions League hay in their backyard over the next few months. Unbeaten in all 17 league games at home last season, they would love their Jose Alvalade stadium to be a fortress in Europe too.

Since the turn of the century, Sporting have only qualified for the Champions League knockout rounds twice, reaching the last 16 in 2008-09 and 2021-22.

But do not write them off. After two Portuguese league titles in four seasons, there is a vibe of confidence and renewal at the club, with their excellent coach Ruben Amorim still making all the right calls. For many long-term observers of the Portuguese game, this is one of the best Sporting sides in years, a team of fluidity, verve and spirit.

Six years after angry Sporting fans broke into the club's training ground to attack the players, the prevailing atmosphere is altogether calmer and more joyous.

Top coach... Ruben Amorim

Who is Sporting's most underrated performer?

The conversation inevitably would lead to the often undetected merits of Danish midfield enforcer Morten Hjulmand, who was snapped up a year ago for €21m from Italian outfit Lecce. A leader by example, he plays with drive, vision and most important of all, imposing physicality. He may not slip under the radar much longer if Sporting can progress in this season's competition.

COACH
Ruben Amorim
Having been linked with the Liverpool and West Ham jobs, this could be his last season at Sporting.

KEY MAN
Pedro Goncalves
AKA "Pote", a highly intelligent amalgam of second striker, attacking midfielder and winger – not to mention a goalscorer.

YOUNGSTER
Geovany Quenda
Another gem from Sporting's academy, the 17-year-old winger piled up the goals in the club's youth team.

Where does the bulk of Sporting's attacking threat come from?

Out wide is where Sporting are especially potent, with Mozambique wing-back Geny Catamo providing a dazzling range of skills on either flank and right-winger Francisco Trincao, a huge disappointment in spells at Barcelona and Wolverhampton Wanderers, tying full-backs in knots with his quick feet. Star man Pote, in a free role, regularly floats to the flanks too.

How much will centre-back Sebastian Coates be missed after his move back to Uruguay?

Plenty. Coates, now aged 33, was initially something of a hit-or-miss defender, tough and abrasive, but prone to the odd lapse. But under Amorim, who arrived at Sporting in March 2020, Coates swiftly turned into a much more serious and uncompromising figure. Academy graduate Eduardo Quaresma is the new man in the backline alongside Gonacalo Inacio and Ivorian Ousmane Diomande.

MILAN

New boss under pressure

Most supporters of the *Rossoneri* would consider Zlatan Ibrahimovic's new, ambiguous role at the club as "Operating Partner" or "Senior Advisor to the Ownership" as nothing but a sideshow. What the red-and-black faithful are really concerned about is the credibility of new coach Paulo Fonseca, who took over from the sacked Stefano Pioli this summer.

Milan supporters can be notoriously hard to please. Just a few months ago, they successfully petitioned the board not to appoint the one-time Spain and Sevilla boss Julen Lopetegui. And now, after a shaky start to the new Serie A season, they are turning on Fonseca, particularly targeting him for the team's poor defending in a home draw with Torino and defeat at newly-promoted Parma.

Fonseca does have a decent CV. He won titles galore in a three-year stint in Ukraine with Shakhtar Donetsk and coached the Miners in two Champions League campaigns, reaching the last 16 in 2017-18. Fonseca's problem is that he is not highly-rated in Italy, labelled a flop during a two-season spell with Roma between 2019 and 2021.

Marquee signing ...Alvaro Morata

COACH
Paulo Fonseca
Claimed the huge Champions League scalp of Manchester City when in charge of Shakhtar in December 2017.

KEY MAN
Rafael Leao
Capable of terrifying any defence with his pace, power and skill, but needs to improve his finishing.

YOUNGSTER
Yunus Musah
There is plenty more to come from the 21-year-old USA international midfielder, who joined from Valencia in 2023.

Have Milan gambled by bringing in 31-year-old Spain striker Alvaro Morata from Atletico Madrid?

It's true that Morata is currently Spanish football's most divisive player, relentlessly mocked for forever wandering offside and missing glaring chances. But let's not get carried away. Good enough to play for the likes of Real Madrid, Chelsea, Juventus and Atletico, he certainly knows where the goal is and is a fine leader, having skippered Spain to Euro 2024 glory recently.

How does Fonseca solve Milan's acute defensive deficiencies?

Italian reporters jumped all over it recently when midfielder Yunus Musah revealed that he was not sure whether to initiate the press or pull back. Milan's pressing game used to be better co-ordinated, as well as more intense. Ball-watching is prevalent, and so are the wide gaps in *Rossoneri* territory.

What was Milan's top priority in their summer of recruitment?

Besides the signing of Morata – whose €13m release fee was triggered – the name of the game was to inject more muscle, height and aggression. Those criteria led to Monaco and France powerhouse midfielder Youssouf Fofana, Salzburg's Serbian centre-back Strahinja Pavlovic, former Tottenham right-back Emerson Royal and Tammy Abraham on a year loan from Roma.

ASTON VILLA

Back on the biggest stage

Back at the European top table after 41 years of exile, Villa are very much reaping the benefits of their decision in the autumn of 2022 to appoint the highly experienced Basque coach Unai Emery who, in less than two seasons in charge, has worked a minor miracle, transforming a relegation-threatened outfit into Champions League qualifiers.

Little wonder Emery was shortlisted for the Premier League Manager of the Year award last season. Not since 1996 had Villa scaled the heights of a top-four finish and it speaks volumes for Emery's ability that the Villans will become only the 12th English team to play in the Champions League since the competition was rebranded in 1992.

No one expects this Villa side to emulate the European Cup winners of 1982. For all their consistent heroics last season – spending 150 days in the top four – the talent is spread a little too thinly, their high-risk high line can make them vulnerable defensively and they are bound to miss winger Moussa Diaby and midfielder Douglas Luiz, who moved on in the summer to the Saudi Pro League and Juventus respectively.

Rebuilt midfield... Amadou Onana

COACH
Unai Emery
A footballing obsessive, noted for drilling his players with tactical analysis before each game.

KEY MAN
Ollie Watkins
Followed up on firing Villa to fourth by scoring England's late winner against the Netherlands at Euro 2024. Ready for his next challenge.

YOUNGSTER
Ian Maatsen
The Dutch left-back spent last season on loan at CL finalists Dortmund, before joining Villa from Chelsea this summer.

How will Unai Emery fill the gap left by the departure of Douglas Luiz?

The complete engine-room performer, Luiz was so influential that two players will be required to replace him. Amadou Onana, a £50m summer signing from Everton, will bring physicality and solid distribution, while his fellow Belgian Youri Tielemans – who joined Villa in 2023 – provides control, composure, defence-splitting passes and a long-range threat.

How must Villa improve defensively on last season?

With 61 goals conceded in the Premier League last term, Villa had one of the most porous backlines in the division, much of the fragility stemming from a lack of speed to the rear and the risky high line. When their offside trap came off, they were a scourge of opposition attacks, but when exposed it also left huge gaps. They were also vulnerable to swift counters and were susceptible to turnovers in their own territory.

Is it fair to claim that Unai Emery is merely a Europa League specialist?

While the Basque has won the Europa League a record four times (three times with Sevilla and once with Villarreal), his record as a Champions League coach is none too shabby either. He steered Villarreal to the semis in 2021-22 and has a win percentage in the competition of 41.5 – not bad considering that, other than with PSG, most of his previous 53 games in the competition have been with relative underdogs (Valencia, Spartak Moscow, Sevilla and Villarreal) which Villa fans can surely take heart from.

The Dark Horses

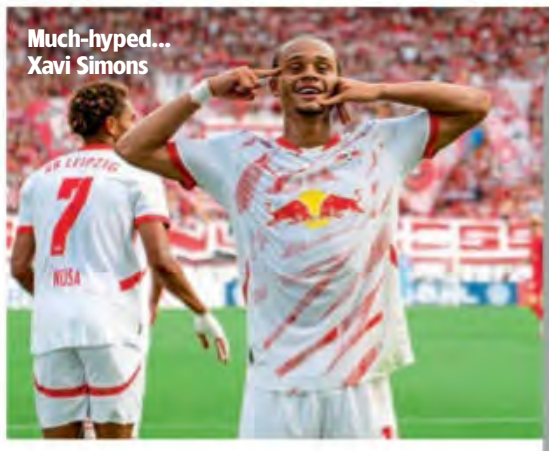
RB LEIPZIG

Part of the Champions League furniture

Only Champions League participants since 2017, the *Roten Bullen* have more than held their own, reaching the last 16 on three occasions and exceeding all expectations by going all the way to the semi-finals in 2019-20 under young coach Julian Nagelsmann.

This will be their sixth straight year in the Champions League and any sense of foreboding has long since been binned; Leipzig believe they belong at this level, and in much-underrated coach Marco Rose and such outstanding youngsters as Slovenian striker Benjamin Sesko, Dutch attacking midfielder Xavi Simons and Austrian holder Nicolas Seiwald they have plenty of talent.

Unlike 12 months ago, when they had the heart ripped out of the team - with Josip Gvardiol, Dominik Szoboszlai and Christopher Nkunku all moving on - their first-team unit is now settled. The only departures of note were Spain star Dani Olmo (Barcelona) and French centre-back Mohamed Simakan (Al Nassr).



Much-hyped... Xavi Simons

How much will Olmo be missed?

A rising star of the world game, the clever Catalan can make a difference in all manner of positions: number ten, wide on the left or as a false nine – as proved at Euro 2024. Brilliant between the lines and in improvisational mode, he is nothing less than a genius. Still, he only played 25 of RB's 45 games last term, and has been replaced by 20-year-old Belgium creative midfielder Arthur Vermeeren, on loan from Atletico Madrid.

COACH
Marco Rose
Now in his third season, Rose has given RB continuity after the short reigns of Jesse Marsch and Domenico Tedesco.

KEY MAN
Xavi Simons
Much-hyped as a youngster, a process that did him no favours, the attacking midfielder is finally looking the real deal.

YOUNGSTER
Castello Lukeba
Composed and athletic centre-back who has made great strides since joining RB from Lyon 12 months ago.

Who could be Leipzig's revelation of the season?

RB have high hopes that 19-year-old Norwegian left-winger Antonio Nusa, whom they signed this summer for a cool €22m from Club Brugge, will turn out to be worth every penny. Good enough to make his Champions League debut for Brugge at the age of just 17, marking the occasion with a goal against Porto, Nusa had been tracked by RB scouts for almost three years.

Is long-serving Hungary keeper Peter Gulacsi stil Leipzig's No.1?

Gulacsi, a regular starter for his country, will start the new season in pole position in the RB hierarchy, but will have to work hard to see off the threat of Belgian understudy Maarten Vandevoordt. In 2019, he became the youngest goalkeeper in Champions League history, when he played for Genk at Napoli aged 17 years 287 days, and arrived in a €10m deal this summer.

PSV

The great entertainers

Shame that PSV are no longer the major European force they used to be in the 1970s and '80s, a golden period when they held aloft both the UEFA Cup in 1977-78 and the European Cup a decade later. The mutation of football into big business and the concentration of power in a closed circle of European leagues saw the likes of PSV fall down the continental pecking order.

But in the Netherlands, they still pack a punch, 11 times Eredivisie champions this century and regally cruising to the title last season, a campaign in which they lost only once. Coach Peter Bosz, who had not won a single trophy in 23 years, finally struck gold in 2023-24, his spectacular philosophy working wonders.

"I'm not so happy for myself that I've become a winner in the Eredivisie," he declared after PSV clinched the title. "I'm happier because we played great football and entertained the fans. That, for me, is more important and beautiful than a title."

License to thrill...Johan Bakayoko

In the last decade, PSV have only reached the Champions League knockout phase on two occasions: the last 16 in 2015-16 and last term.

What are the key elements of Bosz's playing style?

Above all, it's a blueprint for a hungry and hyper-energetic group of players, a thoroughly positive agenda featuring an intensive high-pressing game and all-out attacking approach. Whether using a 4-2-3-1 or a 4-3-3, Bosz insists that his side flood forward, sometimes pushing as many as seven players into attacking areas.

COACH
Peter Bosz
Has only won four Champions League games out of 20 while in charge of PSV, Dortmund and Leverkusen.

KEY MAN
Joey Veerman
All-action midfielder whose excellent set-piece delivery, game IQ and passing flair has made him a Dutch international.

YOUNGSTER
Malik Tillman
Attacking midfielder who impressed on loan from Bayern Munich last season before signing permanently.

What are the weaknesses of such an adventurous way of playing?

The knock on Bosz always has been that his tactics are unnecessarily risky, that the gung-ho approach leaves his side especially vulnerable to counter-attacks. Up against Eredivisie teams who sit back in numbers, there is less likelihood of being picked off on the break. When facing high quality in the Champions League, PSV are far less comfortable.

Can winger Johan Bakayoko maintain his exciting form of last season?

The Belgium right-winger, an intricate dribbler boasting afterburner speed, made an immense contribution to the PSV cause in 2023-24, scoring 14 goals in all competitions and creating the same number for his team-mates. One man-marker simply can't contain him.

BENFICA

In need of a new direction

Roger Schmidt, whom Benfica recently fired as head coach, knows all about the highs and lows of holding the reins at the Estadio da Luz. While steering the club to a thoroughly deserved league title win in 2022-23, he was showered with praise for the Eagles' free-flowing attacking football and blockbuster entertainment. Sadly for the German, the good times would not last long.

Despite Benfica finishing second in the Primeira Liga last term, the drop-off in standards were there for all to see, and with performances even worse in the early stages of the current campaign, Schmidt's stock had reduced to next to zero. As the fans bayed and jeered, club president Rui Costa had no other choice but to put the former PSV, Salzburg and Leverkusen boss out of his misery.

The harsh reality is that Benfica have simply sold too many key stars in recent times: striker Goncalo Ramos and wing-back Alex Grimaldo moving to PSG and Leverkusen respectively a year ago and two more star men exiting this summer: midfield starlet Joao Neves joining the Portuguese diaspora at PSG and much underrated second-striker Rafa Silva shipping out to Besiktas in Turkey.

High hopes... new striker Vangelis Pavlidis

COACH
Bruno Lage
In his second spell in the Benfica hot-seat, Lage previously led them to a come-from-behind league title triumph in 2018-19.

KEY MAN
Anatoliy Trubin
Top-class Ukrainian keeper signed a year ago from Shakhtar Donetsk for a bargain €10m. Now worth double.

YOUNGSTER
Orkun Kokcu
A consummate midfield all-rounder who asked for more freedom and less responsibility under ex-coach Schmidt.

Will new coach Bruno Lage stick with the much-criticised midfield pivot pairing of Florentino Luis and Leandro Barreiro?

Highly unlikely. What better way for a new boss to immediately earn himself some brownie points. While the pair are solid ball-winners and no slouches when it comes to securing second balls and pressing, neither brings enough verticality in their passing and the play is far too pedestrian. Luxembourg ace Barreiro, a new signing from German outfit Mainz, has more penetrative qualities but has not shown them yet.

What does Lage need to happen to turn things around quickly?

Lage will no doubt be praying that new Greek striker Vangelis Pavlidis, who arrived this summer in an €18m deal from AZ, quickly finds his shooting boots. It would also be tremendously helpful if the German left-winger Jan-Niklas Beste, a wonderful dead-ball exponent signed from Bundesliga side Heidenheim, hits his stride after injury.

Does the late swoop for Turkey ace Kerem Akturkoglu make sense?

Akturkoglu had an enviable track record for goals and assists at Galatasaray and will give Benfica a huge shot in the arm with his penetration and commitment. If he and fellow new boys Renato Sanches and Zeki Amdouni can work in tandem, the Eagles might well have struck gold.

ATALANTA

Europa League champions step up

Only rarely do coaches in Italy have the luxury of an extended stay at a club, so hats off to Atalanta boss Gian Piero Gasperini who has endured at *La Dea* for eight seasons and counting.

A genuine Italian football pioneer, preferring adventure to pragmatism and never losing faith in his concept of high-risk, turbo-charged attacking football, the Silver Fox is quite rightly regarded as one of the most important coaching trendsetters in Europe this century and finally received his palpable due when Atalanta claimed the Europa League last term, beating hot favourites Bayer Leverkusen 3-0 in the final.

The continuity which Gasperini stands for has played a fundamental part in Atalanta's development into a centre of excellence. But even in this stable sporting environment, accidents can happen and the club has certainly had its setbacks this summer. Striker Gianluca Scamacca had to go under the knife after damaging knee ligaments in a pre-season friendly, and Netherlands midfielder Teun Koppmeiners thought it a good idea to skip training in order to force through a transfer to Juventus.

Impressive debutant ...Marco Brescianini

COACH
Gian Piero Gasperini
Learnt his football A-Z as a youth teamer at Juventus, for whom he played alongside the late, great Paolo Rossi.

KEY MAN
Ederson
Often overshadowed by Koopmeiners, the Brazilian is a mix of ball-winning bite, awareness and technical poise.

YOUNGSTER
Matteo Ruggeri
Energetic left wing-back who scored a thumping finish against Marseille in last season's Europa League.

Is there any possibility of Gasperini losing his ultra-competitive edge?

Hell will probably freeze over first. The 66-year-old may be the oldest current coach in Serie A, but he has shown no sign of losing his trademark competitive spirit, the spiky ambition of the eternal debutant. No chance of him not being motivated by the Champions League. He will be aiming to improve on the two last-16 exits of 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Who could be the next young stars to shine for Atalanta?

Atalanta beat off stiff competition from Napoli to sign 24-year-old midfielder Marco Brescianini on loan from Frosinone, and he scored twice against Lecce on his debut. The club's academy also continues to thrive: Marco Palestra (19), a right-back who has made giant strides of late, and Alberto Manzoni (19), a midfielder that gave up a promising gymnastics career to concentrate on football, were both late substitutes in the 2-0 defeat to Real Madrid in the UEFA Super Cup.

How difficult are Atalanta to play against?

It's no coincidence that such renowned coaches as Pep Guardiola and Carlo Ancelotti have both described a clash with Gasperini and his warrior brothers as being akin to a visit to the dentist. Never happier than when forcing the opposition into one-on-one duels all over the pitch, the Gasperini credo is take the other side out of their comfort zone, prompting rethinks and eventually panic – as Bayer Leverkusen discovered.

The Outsiders

GIRONA
After the exodus

What a shame that Girona's stellar efforts of last season, qualifying for their first-ever Champions League expedition via a totally unexpected third-place in La Liga, promptly segued into a mass exodus of influential players. Ukraine striker Artem Dovbyk, the top scorer in La Liga last term with 24 goals, left for Roma, much-underrated midfielder Aleix Garcia signed for Leverkusen, Manchester City snapped up dribbling maestro Savinho, on-loan right-back Yan Couto ended up at Dortmund, while another loanee, centre-back Eric Garcia, returned to mother club Barcelona.

The hope is that long-serving director of sport Quique Carcel continues to sniff out quality at bargain prices. His recruits for 2024-25 include former Spain U21 striker Abel Ruiz (ex-Braga), Colombian winger Yaser Asprilla (Watford), Dutch flyer Arnaut Danjuma (Villarreal), North Macedonia ace Bojan Miovski (Aberdeen), Czech centre-back Ladislav Krejci (Sparta Prague) and Netherlands box-to-box midfielder Donny van de Beek, whose career nose-dived after leaving Ajax for Manchester United four years ago.

New boy... Bryan Gil

Will the "English Connection" work?
Premier League experience apparently was a key attribute as Girona went about their summer rebuild, bringing in Van de Beek, winger Bryan Gil (on loan from Tottenham) and former Chelsea and Southampton defensive midfielder Oriol Romeu, who is on secondment from Barcelona. All three have had up-and-down careers, but the air at the Montilivi does have restorative qualities.

COACH
Michel
The Girona boss says his priority this season is La Liga survival. Don't believe a word of it.

KEY MAN
Viktor Tsyhankov
Left-footed Ukraine winger, 26, who can work his magic on either flank. Made his Champions League bow with Dynamo Kyiv at 18.

YOUNGSTER
Gabriel Misehouy
Skilful and confident 19-year-old wide or attacking midfielder, snapped up this summer on a free transfer from Ajax.

How will coach Michel fill the gap left by the Roma-bound Dovbyk?
Abel Ruiz, a *La Masia* graduate who made his name in Portugal with Braga, is in pole position to assume the Dovbyk mantle. Also in the frame are new boy Miovski and the Uruguayan veteran Cristhian Stuani (ex-Middlesbrough).

Does the massive turnover in personnel spell trouble?
Despite a nightmarish off-season of endless comings and goings, coach Michel is a brilliant team-builder and could well reproduce the sort of highly competitive blend that took them to such heights last term – a disciplined, totally committed and homogenous bloc which is very difficult to get the better of.

BOLOGNA
After the exodus part II

Like Girona, the *Rossoblu* also paid a high price for last season's extraordinary achievements, returning to Europe's elite competition for the first time in 60 years.

Thiago Motta, the mastermind of this improbable success, was promptly head-hunted by Juventus and was joined in the departure lounge by two of the team's most influential performers: stylish defender Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal) and fast-improving Dutch striker Joshua Zirkzee (Manchester United). That's a lot of influence and excellence to lose at once, compounded by a knee injury to Lewis Ferguson that will keep the outstanding Scotland midfielder out for the foreseeable future.

New coach Vincenzo Italiano, who spent the last three years at Fiorentina, will likely be hard-pressed to maintain Bologna's romantic upward momentum. The 46-year-old, who was also linked with Napoli this summer, is very much a specialist in the knockout arena, steering Fiorentina to three cup finals (back-to-back Conference League showpieces in 2023 and 2024, and the 2023 Copa Italia final). He will not want to be reminded that he lost all three.

Talismanic winger ...Riccardo Orsolini

How easy will it be for Bologna to fill the gap left by Zirkzee?
First and foremost, Bologna's creators will have to adjust to a different kind of player at the point of the attack. While Zirkzee was a very mobile type, who liked to drop deep, combine with team-mates and put in a lot of work off the ball, the two strikers expected to take up the slack – Argentine Santiago Castro and new signing from Toulouse Thijs Dallinga – are penalty-box predators. Nicolo Cambiaghi, a €10m signing from Atalanta, will provide more frontline mobility.

COACH
Vincenzo Italiano
At Fiorentina, the German-born boss went 142 games without selecting the same starting XI in consecutive fixtures.

KEY MAN
Riccardo Orsolini
Talismanic right-winger with craft and goalscoring ability. Describes himself as a surfer who has found his best wave at Bologna.

YOUNGSTER
Dan Ndoye
Clever and speedy forward, who was one of Switzerland's standout players at Euro 2024.

Which principles are common to Italiano and his predecessor Motta?
Both coaches are advocates of playing out constructively from the back, deploying defenders who are comfortable on the ball and who relish stepping out and using their initiative. Their idea is that every player in the team has a part to play in an attacking sense. The evidence? In last season's Serie A, Bologna had 16 different players on the scoresheet, while Italiano's Fiorentina had 18 different goalscorers.

CELTIC

Frustration brewing

On the back of a second consecutive Scottish league and cup double, you would expect Celtic fans to be deliriously floating on air. Not a bit of it. After years of coming up short in Europe – Celtic last progressed beyond the Champions League group stage in 2013 – supporter anger has been brewing at the board's apparent reluctance to spend extensively in the transfer market.

A large section of the Hoops fanbase continues to scream long and loud, and the toxicity is tangible. But if new signings Adam Idah (Norwich City), Arne Engels (Augsburg) and Auston Trusty (Sheffield United) quickly come up trumps, some disgruntled fans may be appeased.

Vital forward ...Kyogo Furuhashi

How badly will Celtic miss Denmark international Matt O'Riley after his departure for Brighton?

In two-and-a-half seasons at Parkhead, O'Riley was often the difference-maker, accumulating goals and assists and always stepping up in the vital moments and the biggest games. Despite his recent ankle injury, the £25m fee that Brighton paid for his services could prove a bargain.

COACH
Brendan Rodgers
Despite his many domestic titles, Rodgers has just two Champions League victories with Celtic.

KEY MAN
Kyogo Furuhashi
Celtic's talisman, whose goals and energy so often prove vital.

YOUNGSTER
Matthew Anderson
The 20-year-old left-back impressed on loan at Admira Wacker last term.

Did Celtic remove the Champions League monkey from their back with the 2-1 win over Feyenoord in last season's group phase?

That victory certainly was overdue, their first group-stage win at home in over a decade (dating back to a 2-1 win v Ajax in October 2013) and only their second three-point haul in six years in the CL. For a club of Celtic's prestige and history – European champions in 1966-67 – that's an unacceptable state of affairs.

CLUB BRUGGE

Rebuilt frontline

The sensational events of last season in the Belgian top flight can easily be condensed into five words: never write off Club Brugge. At the end of the regular season in Belgium, the *Blauw-Zwart* trailed league pacesetters Union Saint-Gilloise by a whopping 19 points. But while Union stumbled in the top-six play-off round, Club found their groove, eventually landing their 19th title.

Sadly for the blue-and-blacks, they were unable to retain their most dangerous attacking weapons, with the free-scoring Brazilian striker Igor Thiago and outstanding winger Antonio Nusa leaving for Brentford and RB Leipzig respectively.

New striker... Gustaf Nilsson

To whom will Club Brugge look to fill Thiago and Nusa's boots?

Christos Tzolis, who recently arrived from Norwich City, is one. A Premier League move in 2021 didn't work out for the Greek winger, but still only 22 he looks to be back on the up after finishing joint-top scorer in the 2.Bundesliga last season with 22 goals on loan at Fortuna Dusseldorf. He will link up with Swedish striker Gustaf Nilsson, another new arrival, who plundered 17 goals for Union Saint-Gilloise last campaign.

COACH
Nicky Hayen
Former youth coach who replaced Ronny Deila in March.

KEY MAN
Joel Ordonez
Ecuador centre-back with bucket loads of heart and grit.

YOUNGSTER
Kaye Furo
Tall Belgium U17 striker signed from Antwerp as a youth.

In what department do Club sometimes let themselves down?

The Belgian champions can be an enigma, lacking consistency of purpose and focus in the course of 90 minutes. They can open the scoring, dominate and then inexplicably go into their shells. Coach Nicky Hayen admits that such fluctuating levels of intensity is a worry.

MONACO

Progressive principality

The Monte Carlo club is 100 years old this year and their Austrian coach Adi Hutter aims to celebrate the occasion by setting the bar as high as possible for the 2024-25 campaign.

As well as maintaining their lofty perch in Ligue 1 – they finished as runners-up last season – Hutter is plotting a course to the Champions League knockout stages. Why not?" he says. "I think we have the team to do it."

Champions League finalists in 2004, beaten 3-0 by Jose Mourinho's Porto, the Monegasques last made a splash in this competition seven years ago when a side featuring Kylian Mbappe and Bernardo Silva beat Manchester City and Dortmund en route to the semis.

Livewire... Takumi Minamino

Prolific France striker Wissam Ben Yedder was released this summer. Who will take up the slack?

As he proved at Euro 2024, Switzerland front-man Breel Embolo is slowly but surely regaining his form after a long injury lay-off. Monaco also will be banking on more end-product from USA striker Folarin Balogun, who flattered to deceive somewhat last season, his first at the Stade Louis II.

COACH
Adi Hutter
Ex-Bundesliga boss with a reputation for expertly coaching the art of *gegenpressing*.

KEY MAN
Takumi Minamino
The effervescent attacker is Monaco's go-to man in the final third.

YOUNGSTER
Wilfried Singo
Ivory Coast's right-back in their AFCON victory.

Could Monaco receive a post-Olympic boost from a trio of medallists at the Paris Games?

A club with an excellent record in youth development, Monaco had two players in France's Olympic football squad that won silver in Paris – centre-back Soungoutou Magassa, 20, and attacking midfielder Maghnes Akliouche, 22, who has started the new season in fine fettle – while midfielder Eliesse Ben Seghir captured bronze with Morocco.

The Outsiders

FEYENOORD

Under new management

Eredivisie runners-up last season, the Rotterdammers took many by surprise in the Netherlands when opting this summer to replace the hugely popular Liverpool-bound coach Arne Slot with the Dane Brian Priske, who signed a three-year deal at De Kuip.

This is the first time Feyenoord have employed a foreign coach in 33 years, since the Swede Gunder Bengtsson was in charge between 1989 and 1991. Priske certainly will want to avoid the meagre returns of the Bengtsson era, a period of mid-table anonymity and a decidedly toxic atmosphere at the club.

Fresh from two highly successful seasons at Sparta Prague, where he masterminded the Czech league title in 2022-23 and a league-cup double last campaign, Priske is only too aware that he must not overly tamper with Slot's template: the faith in academy graduates, the front-foot attacking football, the confidence and unity he brought to the entire organisation and, of course, the sporting achievements: the Eredivisie title in 2022-23, last season's Dutch Cup and a silver medal in the 2021-22 Conference League.

High fives... Feyenoord

Why did Feyenoord turn to Priske?

Like Slot, the Dane has a well-founded reputation for analysing the strengths and weaknesses of players, for working stintlessly to improve individuals in all ways – tactically, technically and mentally. That has to be the modus operandi at a club of limited financial resources, where buying high-price talent is not an option.

COACH
Brian Priske
Crucially he speaks fluent Dutch, having played in Belgium with Genk and Club Brugge and coached Antwerp.

KEY MAN
Calvin Stengs
Fortunately for Feyenoord, this attacking midfielder of pace and guile had second thoughts over a summer move to MLS.

YOUNGSTER
Gjivai Zechiel
Only 20, the busy, tactically-aware midfielder looked the part against PSV in the Dutch Super Cup.

How key is striker Santiago Gimenez?

While not quite the finished article, the Mexican has piled up 49 goals in two seasons and no one at the club comes close to his poaching prowess in the box, his flair for being in the right place at the right time and his killer instinct.

How has this summer's transfer window affected the squad?

Southampton's collapsed move for first-choice keeper Justin Bijlow gave the club a boost, but the loss of stalwarts Lutsharel Geertruida (RB Leipzig) and Mats Wieffer (Brighton), along with the expiration of explosive winger Yankuba Minteh's loan, has hit them hard. Hwang In-beom (Red Star Belgrade), Jordan Lotomba (Nice) and Ibrahim Osman (Brighton) have some pretty heavy lifting to do.

STUTTGART

A club on the up

First, the bad news: three of the key contributors to their stunning Bundesliga runners-up spot have headed for the exit, with 28-goal striker Serhou Guirassy and stopper Waldemar Anton both moving to Dortmund and versatile defender Hiroki Ito lured away by Bayern Munich.

Now for the good tidings: the smart recruitment of a gaggle of ultra-exciting newcomers, including Bosnian front-man Ermedin Demirovic (Augsburg) – who has the quality to be a Europe-wide sensation – centre-back Jeff Chabot (Cologne), midfielder Yannick Keitel (Freiburg) and Swiss schemer Fabian Rieder (Rennes).

Exciting times for the Swabian club's faithful, deprived of Champions League football for 14 years and quick to snap up all of the 36,000 available season tickets.

Despite rumours linking him to Bayern Munich, Chelsea and Manchester United, highly impressive young coach Sebastian Hoeness, the nephew of Bayern icon Uli Hoeness and son of former German national team centre-forward Dieter Hoeness, remains in charge and ready to take on the next big challenge.

Big potential ...Ermedin Demirovic

How will Hoeness' Stuttgart set up?

Within the framework of his preferred 4-2-3-1 and 4-4-2 systems, Hoeness puts a premium on solid possession to establish control and a brave and direct attacking style. His Stuttgart is especially adept at pressing, with four narrow mid-fielders in their element winning the ball. In attack, the immensely mobile Deniz Undav is particularly hard to pick up.

COACH
Sebastian Hoeness
A former youth coach at RB Leipzig and Bayern, he cut his senior teeth at Hoffenheim.

KEY MAN
Chris Fuhrich
Elusive left-winger now fulfilling his potential after failing to make the grade at Dortmund.

YOUNGSTER
Enzo Millot
The 22-year-old Frenchman is Stuttgart's Swiss Army knife, bringing technique, speed and creativity to any number of attacking positions.

Is their squad stronger or weaker?

Never mind the big-name departures. The Swabians have bought wisely and in quantity this summer and appear to have greater strength in depth, with good competition for starting roles all over the field. Sighs of relief could be heard all over Stuttgart when Bayern Munich did not follow through on their interest in star winger Chris Fuhrich.

What is Stuttgart's masterplan?

They are doing a fine job of identifying youngsters with high ceilings that can be sold on for a big profit. Among the most promising of this year's newcomers are striker Nick Woltemade (Werder Bremen) and winger Justin Diehl (Cologne). Another big success story is defensive midfielder Angelo Stiller, the former Bayern trainee who arrived from Hoffenheim last year.

BREST

Unlikely underdogs

After the ignominy of going bankrupt in 1991 and spending many years in the French amateur ranks (1991 to 2004), the unfashionable Breton outfit suddenly have a place in the sun to enjoy, about to embark on their first-ever Champions League adventure.

Still a second-tier side five years ago and European competition debutants, Brest's rags-to-riches story has brought out the worst of some Gallic pundits, who claim that they are not worthy of representing France on the big stage.

Coach Eric Roy, who masterminded last season's improbable third-place finish in Ligue 1, responded by saying that that's not his problem.

Unlikely underdogs ...Brest

Did Eric Roy deserve his 2023-24 French Coach of the Year award?
Absolutely. What the former Marseille, Lyon, Nice and Sunderland midfielder achieved last term was nothing short of a miracle, taking a team that was second from bottom of Ligue 1 when he arrived in January 2023 and – with more or less the same group of players – turning them into a winning machine, never admitting defeat and superb at retrieving second balls.

COACH
Eric Roy
Coaches as he played, emphasising self-sacrifice and simplicity.

KEY MAN
Pierre Lees-Melou
Shifted from advanced midfielder to ball-winner with excellent results.

YOUNGSTER
Abdallah Sima
On loan from Brighton, the tricky forward shone for Rangers in last term's Europa League.

Where will Brest host their European fixtures this season?
Sadly, their rather rustic 15,000 Stade Francis-Le Ble, which only has around 5,000 seats, does not conform to UEFA requirements. Thus, the Pirates will be forced to emigrate to the Stade Roudourou in Guingamp, a good 100km to the east in Brittany, for their first-ever Champions League home games.

STURM GRAZ

Red Bulls' vanquishers

No wonder the decibels were turned up to the maximum at Sturm's Merkur Arena on the final whistle of a 2-0 victory over Klagenfurt on the final weekend of last season. For only the fourth time in their history, the team known as the "Blackies" scooped the national championship, their first domestic crown in 13 years.

It was a long time coming for Sturm – who made it a double by adding the Austrian Cup as well – after ten long years of watching Red Bull Salzburg win title after title. With an average age of just 23, the Styrians have plenty of scope to grow and develop, but the step up to the Champions League will be a big one.

Rubbing shoulders... Sturm faced PSG in pre-season

What are the chances of a repeat of the 2000-01 Champions League when Sturm reached the last 16?
Highly unlikely. They have endured a whirlpool of signings and departures this summer, presenting coach Christian Ilzer with the mammoth task of finding the right blend. Sturm will especially miss talented young Austria midfielder Alexander Prass, who was snapped up by German club Hoffenheim.

COACH
Christian Ilzer
Has built a team in his own image: feisty and uncompromising.

KEY MAN
Otar Kiteishvili
The playmaker helped Georgia reach the last 16 of Euro 2024.

YOUNGSTER
Amady Camara
The 19-year-old Mali striker scored their title-winning goal.

Which of the newcomers could make the biggest impact?
Arjan Malic, a 19-year-old Slovenian centre-back who joined from Austrian second division side Ried, looked very promising in pre-season, as did Lovro Zvonarek, a classy Croatian midfielder on loan from Bayern Munich. Striker Mika Biereth impressed on loan from Arsenal last season and has looked even better since joining permanently.

SHAKHTAR DONETSK

Still fighting on

No need to tell the reigning Ukrainian champions how dangerous life in their homeland is at this time of conflict with Russia. In August, all connected with the Miners were shaken to hear that the hotel they were due to stay at, prior to a league game against Kryvbas, had been the target of a Russian rocket attack, killing two people and injuring five.

It's against this bloody backdrop that Shakhtar begin their 19th campaign in the Champions League, a competition in which they have enjoyed much success, notably a quarter-final in 2010-11.

Last season they defied the odds by finishing third in their group, notably claiming the scalp of Barcelona in their makeshift home of Hamburg's Volkparkstadion, to reach the knockout rounds of the Europa League.

Fighting on....Shahktar in last season's group stage

Where will Shakhtar play their "home" Champions League ties this season?
This time around they will play at another German stadium, Schalke's Veltins-Arena in Gelsenkirchen. The Miners are sure to be well-supported in their continental endeavours with both Ukrainian refugees and local fans from the Ruhr backing the temporary tenants.

COACH
Marino Pusic
Former assistant to new Liverpool boss Arne Slot.

KEY MAN
Mykola Matviyenko
Vice-captain and solid centre-back with a rocket shot.

YOUNGSTER
Heorhiy Sudakov
Silky smooth midfielder, 22, who is one of the brightest stars of Ukraine's national team.

In what sort of form are the 15-time Ukrainian champions?
It's been an erratic start to the new campaign to say the least, with two defeats in their first four fixtures: a 1-0 home loss to Polissya and a 4-3 reverse at Oleksandriya. In the latter, Shakhtar were in total control – 2-0 up and cruising after 25 minutes – only to alarmingly collapse. "We lack stability," bemoaned their coach Marino Pusic.

Play-Off Qualifiers

LILLE
Never say die

Les Dogues are a hard team to kill off. In both qualifying ties, against Fenerbahce and Slavia Prague, there were moments when they were hanging on for dear life, only to rally and eventually prevail. This ability to suffer and still come out on top is an admirable quality and it's no coincidence that just one other French club (Monaco back in 2016-17) has managed to clear the dual hurdles of the Champions League third qualifying round and play-offs.

In the early stages of the season, few French sides have played as well as Lille. Strong in ball retention, effective in their pressing and able to carve out openings at will, they have a lot going for them.

But they also have their faults. In the return fixture versus Slavia, they appeared paralysed for much of the game by the high stakes on the table.

"It wasn't fantastic," said their Belgian defender Thomas Meunier. "In the first half we were apprehensive and stressful. We refused to play."

Dramatic...Jonathan David celebrates scoring against Fenerbahce

How has Lille's approach changed under new coach Bruno Genesio?

Since replacing Paulo Fonseca, the ex-Lyon and Rennes boss has wisely stuck to his predecessor's spadework – playing out from the back, dominating possession and offensive risk-taking – but putting his own stamp on the side by switching to a back three and peppering the playing style with greater directness.

COACH
Bruno Genesio
Famously led Lyon to a 2-1 victory at Manchester City in the group stage of the Champions League in 2018.

KEY MAN
Angel Gomes
Midfielder blessed with tremendous versatility and a sublime skill-set. Recently called up by England (see page 60 for more).

YOUNGSTER
Lucas Chevalier
Brilliant homegrown goalkeeper destined to play for France very soon. A penalty-saving specialist.

Where can Lille improve?

In terms of final balls and finishing, the Lillois must be a little more precise. They have been defensively shaky this term, with the recent sale of outstanding young centre-back Leny Yoro to Manchester United a massive contributing factor. Algerian Aissa Mandi was signed from Villarreal on a free, but Genesio has also been experimenting with newly-signed Belgian international Thomas Meunier in central defence rather than in his usual position of right-back or wing-back.

Are influential midfielders Angel Gomes and Nabil Bentaleb over their recent medical scares?

Bentaleb, who reportedly suffered a cardiac arrest during a five-a-side game in June and had to undergo emergency surgery, is now out of danger but unlikely to resume his career. Stretchered off unconscious after a horrendous clash of heads with a Reims defender, Gomes has also, thankfully, now recovered.

RED BULL SALZBURG
Bouncing back

"Only" second in last season's Austrian Bundesliga – thus bringing an end to a ten-year streak of dominance – the Salzburg suits did not waste any time shifting into reset mode, with chief executive Stephan Reiter making it plain that their first campaign without a trophy since 2012-13 was "a signal that we really must react to."

After getting through two head coaches (Gerhard Struber and Onur Cinel) in 2023-24 following Matthias Jaissle's exit for Saudi Arabia, the Salzburger urgently needed to relight the fire at the Red Bull Arena and believe they have done so with the arrival in the technical area of Pep Lijnders, previously the long-serving right-hand man of Jurgen Klopp at Liverpool. The 41-year-old Dutchman knows all about the mechanics of winning at the top level and quickly steered his new side past Twente and Dynamo Kyiv in qualifying.

Salzburg, though, were a lot less

New man in charge...Pep Lijnders

lucky in the case of newly-acquired Japanese defensive midfielder Takumu Kawamura, who damaged his ACL during a pre-season training camp.

How much of a loss is Real Sociedad-bound midfielder Luka Sucic?

Sucic, still only 22, on occasion flattered to deceive while on Salzburg's books, guilty of nonchalance and prone to

COACH
Pep Lijnders
In his only other spell as a pro head coach, he took charge of Dutch side NEC Nijmegen for a few months in 2018.

KEY MAN
Kamil Piatkowski
Rugged Poland centre-back for whom no cause is ever lost. Superb in recent Champions League qualifiers.

YOUNGSTER
Adam Daghim
Quick and direct, the teenage Dane is shaping up very nicely indeed on the right side of Salzburg's attack.

giving the ball away cheaply in his own half. But the good far outweighs the bad; with his educated left foot, eye for a killer pass and impressive shooting accuracy, the Croatian will be missed.

Who will be Lijnders' skipper?

The armband is now the property of goalkeeper Janis Blaswich who is on a single-season loan from RB Leipzig. "From his first moment here, he gave the impression of relishing the responsibility," said Lijnders.

Will Lijnders try to try to replicate "Klopp Ball" with Salzburg?

It's what he was brought in for: a high, concentrated press, power football in a 4-3-3 and the relentless quest to put the opposition under pressure. The 4-3-1-2 of the last couple of seasons is a thing of the past. Dynamism and intensity will be Salzburg's watchwords, though at certain times out of possession, they do fall back to form a narrow, compact block.

SLOVAN BRATISLAVA

Champions League debutants

Taking part in their first-ever Champions League campaign, Slovan will be hoping to draw some inspiration from the club's greatest achievements in continental football: their shock 3-2 victory over Barcelona in the final of the 1968-69 European Cup Winners' Cup and their major contribution to Czechoslovakia's sensational European Championship win in 1976, the six Slovan players who started the penalty-shootout victory over West Germany in the final.

The Sky Blues feel they are a team of destiny after the play-offs. Trailing Danish outfit Midtjylland with just eight minutes left on the clock, they conjured up two last-gasp goals to progress.

Destiny...Slovan players celebrate v Midtjylland

Has Slovan coach Vladimir Weiss definitively silenced his critics with his side's Champions League ticket?

Probably not, though he is bound to feel a real sense of vindication. Only last year, many in Slovakia were calling for his head. It is a harsh assessment of a boss who has now guided two Slovak clubs to the Champions League. His last tilt was with Artmedia Petrzalka in 2005-06, when his side claimed a stunning 3-2 victory away to Porto – after trailing 2-0 – en route to a third-place group finish.

COACH
Vladimir Weiss Sr
Coached Slovakia at the 2010 World Cup, leading the underdogs to the last 16.

KEY MAN
Vladimir Weiss Jr
Attacking midfielder, 34, who first played in the Champions League 14 years ago. The coach's son.

YOUNGSTER
Nino Marcelli
Extremely promising 19-year-old winger named Slovakia's Young Player of the Season for 2023-24.

What can we expect from Slovan as an attacking force?

A key part of Slovan's offensive threat comes from overloads on the right side, triggered by adventurous Panamanian full-back Cesar Blackman, Armenian winger Tigran Barseghyan and Croat number ten Marko Tolic, who often swaps positions with Barseghyan.

SPARTA PRAGUE

New coach, same approach

Sparta, Czech league winners in each of the past two seasons, are up and running at full tilt again, restored to their domestic perch after nine years of lost momentum and now back in the Champions League for the first time since 2005-06.

Following the summer departure to Feyenoord of highly successful head coach Brian Priske, mastermind of both those league titles, his former assistant Lars Friis has taken charge.

So far, the 48-year-old Dane has shrewdly stuck to the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mantra with positive results, cruising through qualifying ties against Shamrock Rovers, FCSB and Malmo.

Key man... Lukas Haraslin

Is new Kosovan striker Albion Rrahmani an upgrade on Czech forward Jan Kuchta, who recently left the club for Midtjylland?

Most definitely. While Kuchta had many assets, not least his incisive movement, bustling presence and decent finishing ability, Rrahmani is a better all-round frontrunner, superior in link-up play, more skilful, and a natural predator in the penalty box – as he demonstrated with a poacher's close-range finish against Malmo in the play-offs.

COACH
Lars Friis
Danish coach once of Viborg, AaB Aalborg and Brentford's youth team.

KEY MAN
Lukas Haraslin
A winger of vitality, quick feet and scoring ability.

YOUNGSTER
Martin Vitik
Centre-back tasked with replacing Girona-bound Ladislav Krejci.

What are Sparta's strengths?

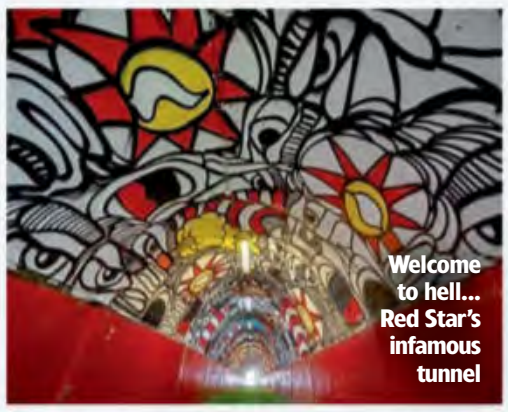
A good high-pressing game, speed on the counter-attack and incisiveness when attacking in wide positions, where Slovakia winger Lukas Haraslin and Serbia wideman Veljko Birmancevic invariably shine. They are also very effective at offensive set-pieces, with an array of well-rehearsed routines.

RED STAR BELGRADE

Welcome to hell

Older supporters of the Belgrade giants still look back longingly to the team's one and only triumph in the European Cup in 1990-91, and that historic night where a legendary side featuring the likes of Darko Pancev, Dejan Savicevic, Robert Prosinecki and Sinisa Mihajlovic defeated Marseille on penalties in the final in Bari.

Serbian SuperLiga champions for the last seven years, Red Star have competed three times in the Champions League in the last six seasons but without covering themselves in glory, finishing bottom of their first phase group on each occasion. Prepare for a white-hot atmosphere at their iconic Rajko Mitic Stadium (aka Marakana) as they look to remedy that.



Welcome to hell... Red Star's infamous tunnel

How much will Red Star miss South Korea midfielder Hwang In-beom, who recently left for Feyenoord?

It's a blow they may not recover from. In last season's Champions League, Hwang was Red Star's standout performer and the club have no one of his industry, drive and technical skills in the middle of the park. When it came to breaking the lines, the indefatigable box-to-box midfielder was their number one asset.

COACH
Vladan Milojevic
His third attempt at the CL in his second spell at Red Star.

KEY MAN
Uros Spajic
Centre-back who made Serbia's Euro 2024 squad but failed to play a game.

YOUNGSTER
Felicio Milson
Angola winger who can cause damage to any defence with his speed and trickery.

Who can replace long-serving centre-back Aleksandar Dragovic?

After Dragovic joined Austria Vienna, the baton of skipper and backline leader has passed to Uros Spajic, a hugely popular player at the Marakana thanks to his commitment and his knack for scoring important headed goals – one in last season's cup final and another in the play-off victory over Bodo/Glimt. He will be partnered by promising young Burkina Faso stopper Nasser Djiga.

Play-Off Qualifiers

DINAMO ZAGREB

A year to remember

This year has been one to remember for the Blues, claiming their 25th Croatian league title since national independence and adding the domestic cup for good measure to complete the 13th domestic double in their history.

Just as significantly, they finally received the green light to build a new stadium on the site of their current Maksimir home. For the best part of three decades, a property dispute over the ownership of the land kept the project on hold – until now. Red-hot on European nights, the Maksimir has been the stage for their last eight Champions League campaigns.

Dinamo have never qualified for the last 16, but have claimed some major scalps in their backyard, pulling off shock victories over Arsenal (2-1 in 2015-16), Atalanta (4-0 in 2019-20) and Chelsea (1-0 in 2022-23).

It says much about Croat football as an export business that the domestically all-powerful Dinamo only had two representatives in the country's Euro 2024 squad this summer: striker Bruno Petkovic and midfielder Martin Baturina.

Impressive... Marko Pjaca scores against Qarabag

Is striker Bruno Petkovic still assured of his place in the starting line-up?

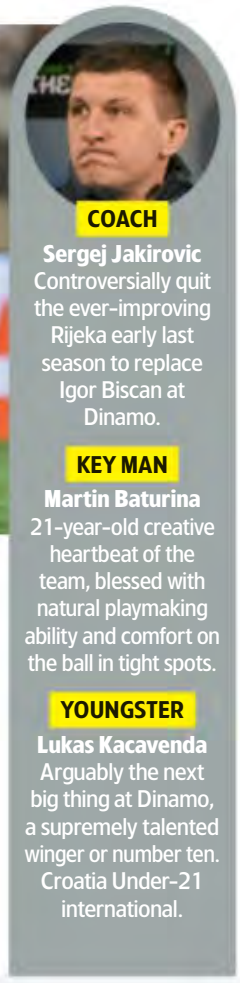
Petkovic is Dinamo's highest-profile player and, after piling up the goals for the club over the past five years, has an undroppable status. But he has not been at his sharpest of late and faces stiff competition from understudy Sandro Kulenovic, 24, who has started the new campaign on fire.

In which position is the influential Marko Pjaca best employed?

The former Juventus, Fiorentina and Schalke forward has the smarts and the technical class to operate on either wing, as a central playmaker or as a second striker, but coach Sergej Jakirovic sees him at his most effective cutting in from the right flank. See his blistering left-footed strike in the Champions League play-off second leg against Qarabag.

Who is the squad's most undervalued player?

Probably Petar Sucic, a highly versatile performer in the middle of the park, equally proficient in a holding role as delivering the creative goods. Although born and raised in Bosnia, his family is Croatian and earlier this year, he switched his international eligibility to Croatia.



COACH
Sergej Jakirovic
Controversially quit the ever-improving Rijeka early last season to replace Igor Biscan at Dinamo.

KEY MAN
Martin Baturina
21-year-old creative heartbeat of the team, blessed with natural playmaking ability and comfort on the ball in tight spots.

YOUNGSTER
Lukas Kacavenda
Arguably the next big thing at Dinamo, a supremely talented winger or number ten. Croatia Under-21 international.

YOUNG BOYS

Strong and stable

The Swiss champions, title winners in six of the last seven years, opted for squad continuity this summer, with the only notable departures being young centre-back Aurele Amenda (returning to parent club Eintracht Frankfurt) and his centre-back partner Fabian Lustenberger who hung up his boots.

Meanwhile, new signings were thin on the ground too. French-Ivorian stopper Tanguy Zoukrou, previously with French second-tier side Troyes, was joined by pacy striker Facinet Conte (ex-Bastia) who was promptly ruled out for at least six months after tearing cruciate knee ligaments in pre-season training.

In contrast to their playing personnel stability, the YB decision-makers opted this summer to bring in the ex-Basel and Winterthur boss Patrick Rahmen, chosen to replace caretaker coach Joel Magnin.

Rahmen had a torrid time in the first few weeks of the new campaign, his new team sitting rock bottom ahead of the international break, with no wins from their opening six Swiss Super League games. Now looks much more secure after qualifying YB for the Champions League at the expense of Galatasaray.

Into the group stage... Young Boys celebrate beating Galatasaray

Who will feature in their new-look defensive pairing?

The duo formed by Guinea's Mohamed Camara and Zoukrou stood up well to the assaults of the Galatasaray forwards, especially in YB's 1-0 win in Istanbul in the second leg of the play-offs. They have an outstanding back-up too in youngster Sadin Crnovrsanin.

Of all the players to have returned to Young Boys after loan stints, who could make the most impact?

Enterprising full-back Zachary Athekame, who YB signed from Neuchatel Xamax in January and then loaned backed for six months, looks quite a prospect. The Swiss U21 international has bounced back well after being rejected as a youth by hometown club Servette.

Where are YB the most dangerous?

They pose a real threat on the right side, with the tandem of attacking right-back Lewin Blum and wide midfielder Joel Monteiro complementing each other very well. Monteiro scored twice in the 3-2 first-leg win over Galatasaray, while Blum is on the road to fulfilling his dream of playing in the German top flight.

COACH
Patrick Rahmen
Prior to this season, the 55-year-old coach was unbeaten in 12 European competition matches at the helm of Basel.

KEY MAN
Filip Ugrinic
Swiss midfielder of Serb heritage, who scored last season against Red Star Belgrade, the club he once supported.

YOUNGSTER
Ebrima Colley
The speedy Gambia winger recently joined Young Boys permanently after a successful loan stint from Atalanta.

All teams compiled by Nick Bidwell

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE: 2024-25 FIXTURES

Tuesday, September 17
Juventus v PSV *(5.45pm)*
Young Boys v Aston Villa *(5.45pm)*
Bayern Munich v Dinamo Zagreb *(8pm)*
Milan v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v Stuttgart *(8pm)*
Sporting v Lille *(8pm)*

Wednesday, September 18
Bologna v Shakhtar Donetsk *(5.45pm)*
Sparta Prague v Red Bull Salzburg *(5.45pm)*
Celtic v Slovan Bratislava *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Internazionale *(8pm)*
Paris Saint-Germain v Girona *(8pm)*

Thursday, September 19
Feyenoord v Bayer Leverkusen *(5.45pm)*
Red Star Belgrade v Benfica *(5.45pm)*
Atalanta v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Atletico Madrid v RB Leipzig *(8pm)*
Brest v Sturm Graz *(8pm)*
Monaco v Barcelona *(8pm)*

Tuesday, October 1
Red Bull Salzburg v Brest *(5.45pm)*
Stuttgart v Sparta Prague *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Paris Saint-Germain *(8pm)*
Barcelona v Young Boys *(8pm)*
Bayer Leverkusen v Milan *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Celtic *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Red Star Belgrade *(8pm)*
PSV v Sporting *(8pm)*
Slovan Bratislava v Manchester City *(8pm)*

Wednesday, October 2
Girona v Feyenoord *(5.45pm)*
Shakhtar Donetsk v Atalanta *(5.45pm)*
Aston Villa v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
Benfica v Atletico Madrid *(8pm)*
Dinamo Zagreb v Monaco *(8pm)*
Lille v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Bologna *(8pm)*
RB Leipzig v Juventus *(8pm)*
Sturm Graz v Club Brugge *(8pm)*

Tuesday, October 22
Milan v Club Brugge *(5.45pm)*
Monaco v Red Star Belgrade *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Shakhtar Donetsk *(8pm)*
Aston Villa v Bologna *(8pm)*
Girona v Slovan Bratislava *(8pm)*
Juventus v Stuttgart *(8pm)*
Paris Saint-Germain v PSV *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Sturm Graz v Sporting *(8pm)*

Wednesday, October 23
Atalanta v Celtic *(5.45pm)*
Brest v Bayer Leverkusen *(5.45pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Lille *(8pm)*
Barcelona v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
Benfica v Feyenoord *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Sparta Prague *(8pm)*
RB Leipzig v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Red Bull Salzburg v Dinamo Zagreb *(8pm)*
Young Boys v Internazionale *(8pm)*

Tuesday, November 5
PSV v Girona *(5.45pm)*
Slovan Bratislava v Dinamo Zagreb *(5.45pm)*
Bologna v Monaco *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Sturm Graz *(8pm)*
Celtic v RB Leipzig *(8pm)*
Lille v Juventus *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Bayer Leverkusen *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v Milan *(8pm)*
Sporting v Manchester City *(8pm)*

Wednesday, November 6
Club Brugge v Aston Villa *(5.45pm)*
Shakhtar Donetsk v Young Boys *(5.45pm)*
Bayern Munich v Benfica *(8pm)*
Feyenoord v Red Bull Salzburg *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Paris Saint-Germain v Atletico Madrid *(8pm)*
Red Star Belgrade v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Sparta Prague v Brest *(8pm)*
Stuttgart v Atalanta *(8pm)*

Tuesday, November 26
Slovan Bratislava v Milan *(5.45pm)*
Sparta Prague v Atletico Madrid *(5.45pm)*
Barcelona v Brest (8pm)
Bayer Leverkusen v Red Bull Salzburg *(8pm)*
Bayern Munich v Paris Saint-Germain *(8pm)*
Internazionale v RB Leipzig *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Feyenoord *(8pm)*
Sporting v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Young Boys v Atalanta *(8pm)*

Wednesday, November 27
Red Star Belgrade v Stuttgart *(5.45pm)*
Sturm Graz v Girona *(5.45pm)*
Aston Villa v Juventus *(8pm)*
Bologna v Lille *(8pm)*
Celtic v Club Brugge *(8pm)*
Dinamo Zagreb v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Monaco v Benfica *(8pm)*
PSV v Shakhtar Donetsk *(8pm)*

Tuesday, December 10
Dinamo Zagreb v Celtic *(5.45pm)*
Girona v Liverpool *(5.45pm)*
Atalanta v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Bayer Leverkusen v Internazionale *(8pm)*
Brest v PSV *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Sporting *(8pm)*
RB Leipzig v Aston Villa *(8pm)*
Red Bull Salzburg v Paris Saint-Germain *(8pm)*
Shakhtar Donetsk v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*

Wednesday, December 11
Atletico Madrid v Slovan Bratislava *(5.45pm)*
Lille v Sturm Graz *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Monaco *(8pm)*
Benfica v Bologna *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Feyenoord v Sparta Prague *(8pm)*
Juventus v Manchester City *(8pm)*
Milan v Red Star Belgrade *(8pm)*
Stuttgart v Young Boys *(8pm)*

Tuesday, January 21
Atalanta v Sturm Graz *(5.45pm)*
Monaco v Aston Villa *(5.45pm)*
Atletico Madrid v Bayer Leverkusen *(8pm)*
Benfica v Barcelona *(8pm)*
Bologna v Borussia Dortmund *(8pm)*
Club Brugge v Juventus *(8pm)*
Liverpool v Lille *(8pm)*
Red Star Belgrade v PSV *(8pm)*
Slovan Bratislava v Stuttgart *(8pm)*

Wednesday, January 22
RB Leipzig v Sporting *(5.45pm)*
Shakhtar Donetsk v Brest *(5.45pm)*
Arsenal v Dinamo Zagreb *(8pm)*
Celtic v Young Boys *(8pm)*
Feyenoord v Bayern Munich *(8pm)*
Milan v Girona *(8pm)*
Paris Saint-Germain v Manchester City *(8pm)*
Real Madrid v Red Bull Salzburg *(8pm)*
Sparta Prague v Internazionale *(8pm)*

Wednesday, January 29
Aston Villa v Celtic *(8pm)*
Barcelona v Atalanta *(8pm)*
Bayer Leverkusen v Sparta Prague *(8pm)*
Bayern Munich v Slovan Bratislava *(8pm)*
Borussia Dortmund v Shakhtar Donetsk *(8pm)*
Brest v Real Madrid *(8pm)*
Dinamo Zagreb v Milan *(8pm)*
Girona v Arsenal *(8pm)*
Internazionale v Monaco *(8pm)*
Juventus v Benfica *(8pm)*
Lille v Feyenoord *(8pm)*
Manchester City v Club Brugge *(8pm)*
PSV v Liverpool *(8pm)*
Red Bull Salzburg v Atletico Madrid *(8pm)*
Sporting v Bologna *(8pm)*
Sturm Graz v RB Leipzig *(8pm)*
Stuttgart v Paris Saint-Germain *(8pm)*
Young Boys v Red Star Belgrade *(8pm)*

Kick-off times are UK. Fixtures are subject to change

Allianz Arena...the final will take place in Munich on May 31, 2025

Destination Bilbao

Nick Bidwell casts his eye over the leading candidates in the 2024-25 Europa League

Basque rivals...Real Sociedad and Athletic Club will be among the contenders for this season's trophy

From Norway's Bodo/Glimt in the lands of northern exposure to Maccabi Tel Aviv in the south, from Porto on the western flank to the eastern frontiers of Qarabag in Azerbaijan, all points of the continental compass will be featured as the curtain goes up on this term's Europa League.

In the first edition of a reformatted competition, which henceforth will use the same formula as the new UEFA Champions League, the old group phase has been replaced by a single 36-team league.

With non-domestic league winners flooding into the Champions League, it has become commonplace to disparage the Europa League, to view it as an irrelevance. The presence in this season's field of 13 clubs who have previously triumphed in Europe says otherwise.

Even when less competitive, the likes of Manchester United, Roma, Lyon and Ajax undoubtedly add a certain spice to proceedings. As does the prize of Champions League access to the Europa League victors.

FAVOURITES

Given Spain's status as the most dominant nation in the history of the UEFA Cup/Europa League, and the fact that Bilbao's magnificent San Mames stadium will host this season's final, it makes eminent sense to look to the Basque country for the prospective winners. **Athletic Club**, overjoyed to have resisted the many suitors of starlet wide-man Nico Williams, have yet to win a European trophy but have come close, losing to Juventus in the 1975-76 final of the UEFA Cup on away goals and beaten by Atletico Madrid in the 2011-12 Europa League showpiece. Meanwhile, Despite the departure of a couple of key players this summer (Robin Le Normand to Atletico and midfielder Mikel Merino to Arsenal), **Real Sociedad** still boast a core of excellence in the shape of engine-room anchorman Martin Zubimendi (who recently turned down Liverpool) and frontline stars Mikel Oyarzabal and Takefusa Kubo. Never mind the decision of veteran German centre-back Mats Hummels to reportedly U-turn on an agreement to join them (opting for Roma instead). The homegrown youngster Jon Pacheco offers more.

Route to the top...the Europa League could prove valuable for Manchester United

If **Manchester United**'s top priority this season is to re-establish themselves in the Premier League top four, the Europa League represents an enticing alternative route back to the continental top table. United won this competition as recently as 2016-17 and in these difficult times for both the club and manager Erik ten Hag, any tangible success would be most welcome.

IN CONTENTION

New striker... Tottenham's Dominic Solanke

Contenders ...Porto

Without silverware since early 2008 – when they lifted the English League Cup – **Tottenham** dearly would love to go all the way in Europe, emulating their glory days of the 1983-84 UEFA Cup. They never are short of boldness under manager Ange Postecoglou and have an excellent new striker in the former Bournemouth finisher Dominic Solanke, though they must tighten up their defending from set-pieces.

Porto, twice winners of the UEFA Cup/Europa League (in 2002-03 and 2010-11), have a definite affinity with this trophy and appear to be re-energised by the new-era power structure of chairman Andre Villas-Boas – the architect of the Dragons' Europa League title in 2011 – and coach Vitor Bruno, who took over in the off-season from long-serving talisman Sergio Conceicao. Their pair of Spanish young guns, attacking midfielder Ivan Jaime and recently-signed ex-Atletico Madrid frontrunner Samu Omorodion, make for a dream partnership in the attacking third.

For all their chronic inconsistency, **Roma** are the sort of mercurial side that could raise their game in Europe. The *Giallorossi* added a great deal of quality in the summer, bringing in midfielders Alexis Saelemaekers (Milan), Enzo Le Fee (Rennes) and Manu Kone (Gladbach), exciting former Juventus winger Matias Soule, prolific Ukrainian striker Artem Dovbyk (Girona), and the experienced centre-back pair Hummels (Dortmund) and Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid).

Germany's **Eintracht Frankfurt** boast an impressive UEFA Cup/Europa League pedigree, winners in 1979-80 and 2021-22 and semi-finalists in 2018-19. Mysteriously, the Waldstadion outfit usually seem to prefer shorter-haul competitions and the frontline of Omar Marmoush, Hugo Ekitike and Igor Matanovic is potentially explosive.

DARK HORSES

After suffering one of the most disastrous seasons in the club's history, finishing well off the pace in fifth in the Eredivisie, **Ajax** desperately needed someone to fix their glaring defensive inadequacies and the early signs are that new coach Francesco Farioli is plugging the gaps. Three clean sheets in six Europa League qualifiers was an encouraging sign and if strikers Brian Brobbey and new recruit Wout Weghorst keep the goals flowing, the Amsterdammers may be in business.

It's hard to work out what to expect from **Lazio** in Europe this term. While the attacking pairing of Argentine centre-forward Taty Castellanos and winger and skipper Mattia Zaccagni make for a great match-winning double act, in other sectors the *Biancocelesti* are a work in progress, a little too slow in their ball circulation and somewhat fragile defensively. New coach Marco Baroni would be wise to give plenty of game-time to loanee front-man Boulaye Dia, who is particularly adept at working between the lines.

On paper, Istanbul outfit **Fenerbahce** are distinct long shots. But who would write off any side managed by the serial European winner that is Jose Mourinho? In a stellar coaching career, he has masterminded the conquest of no fewer than five continental trophies and could have a few tricks up his sleeve this time around. Somewhat unfortunate to be knocked out by Lille in the Champions League qualifying play-offs, Fenerbahce will be looking to experienced campaigners in the form of Brazilian midfielder Fred and the frontline trio of Allan Saint-Maximin, Edin Dzeko and Youssef En-Nesyri. The latter was twice a Europa League winner with Sevilla in 2019-20 and 2022-23.

The Special One... Jose Mourinho at Fenerbahce

Back on track...Ajax beat Panathinaikos on penalties in qualifying

WHO'S WHO?

Ajax *(Netherlands)*
Anderlecht *(Belgium)*
Athletic Club *(Spain)*
AZ *(Netherlands)*
Besiktas *(Turkey)*
Bodo/Glimt *(Norway)*
Braga *(Portugal)*
Dynamo Kyiv *(Ukraine)*
Eintracht Frankfurt *(Germany)*
Elfsborg *(Sweden)*
FCSB *(Romania)*
Fenerbahce *(Turkey)*
Ferencvaros *(Hungary)*
Galatasaray *(Turkey)*
Hoffenheim *(Germany)*
Lazio *(Italy)*
Ludogorets *(Bulgaria)*
Lyon *(France)*
Maccabi Tel Aviv *(Israel)*
Malmo *(Sweden)*
Manchester United *(England)*
Midtjylland *(Denmark)*
Nice *(France)*
Olympiacos *(Greece)*
PAOK *(Greece)*
Porto *(Portugal)*
Qarabag *(Azerbaijan)*
Rangers *(Scotland)*
Real Sociedad *(Spain)*
RFS *(Latvia)*
Roma *(Italy)*
Slavia Prague *(Czech Republic)*
Tottenham Hotspur *(England)*
Twente *(Netherlands)*
Union Saint-Gilloise *(Belgium)*
Viktoria Plzen *(Czech Republic)*

More change

The Conference League is also bracing for a new era, as ***Nick Bidwell*** explains…

Like all UEFA competitions, the Conference League has been the subject of a recent shake-up with the introduction of a single 36-team league, which will designate eight automatic qualifiers for the knockout rounds and the 16 clubs who will play-off to join them. Only in one way does the Conference League differ from UEFA's other cups: clubs here face just six opponents rather than the eight different foes scheduled in the Champions League and Europa League.

The Conference League, in its essence, is all about hope and opening up European club football to more countries than ever before. There's a refreshing, romantic feel to the starting grid this season. A whole host of debutants to continental action, among them Germany's Heidenheim, The New Saints from Wales, Northern Irish side Larne and Petroclub Hincesti of Moldova. Tellingly, some of the Conference League Class of 2024-25 are barely out of nappies: Pafos from Cyprus are just a decade old, while Armenia's Noah were only founded in 2017.

Will Chelsea's balloon burst?…Christopher Nkunku celebrates scoring v Servette in the play-offs

FAVOURITES

Chelsea, Champions League winners in 2011-12 and 2020-21, inevitably are everybody's hot tip to go all the way. But after omitting the likes of Cole Palmer, Romeo Lavia and Wesley Fofana from their group-stage squad, the big question is how seriously will they take it? Do the big-spending Blues use it as a chance to grab silverware, to put themselves back in the saddle after a few lean post-Abramovich years? Or will they approach the competition as a culture shock to endure?

After losing in each of the last two Conference League finals – to West Ham in 2022-23 and Olympiacos last term – **Fiorentina** certainly have a score to settle. How strange that the *Viola*, so often guilty of under-performing in Serie A, have recently found their mojo in European battles. They have an excellent young coach in Raffaele Palladino, appointed this summer after great work with Monza, and have made a host of impressive acquisitions – not least ex-Manchester United keeper David De Gea, striker Moise Kean from Juventus, midfielder Eduardo Bove from Roma and the unappreciated Milan ace Yacine Adli.

Fiorentina's new keeper…David De Gea

The widespread rumours that **Real Betis** coach Manuel Pellegrini was on the verge of moving on this summer proved to be unfounded and it'd be no surprise at all if the *Verdiblancos* put in a sustained push for pre-eminence in the Conference League. Their attacking-third trio of Johnny Cardoso, Isco and Pablo Fornals is high-calibre incorporated, while Vitor Roque and Cedric Bakumbu provide a potentially lethal strikeforce.

IN CONTENTION

Panathinaikos new boy...Tete celebrates scoring again Lille

Surprise packages ...German side Heidenheim

Panathinaikos, runners-up in the European Cup back in 1970-71 and twice semi-finalists in that competition (1984-85 and 1995-96), underlined their capacity to scrap for a result when beating top French side Lens 3-2 on aggregate in the Conference League play-offs in August. Lens were arguably the better side over the two legs, but Panathinaikos were undoubtedly the grittiest and more opportunistic. The Greens have plenty of firepower, with Fotis Ioannidis in attack and summer recruits Tete (ex-Galatasaray) and Facundo Pellistri (Manchester United) on the wings, plus plenty of motivation as they seek to match the exploits of their old rivals Olympiacos last season.

Many clubs of limited financial resources struggle with the twin demands of domestic and European football. But **Heidenheim**, only a Bundesliga outfit for 12 months, could be the exception to the rule. Eighth in the German top flight last season, they will approach their first-ever continental campaign with their usual characteristics: fearlessness, belief and incredibly quick counter-attacks. Coach Franck Schmidt, now in his 18th season in charge, is very much in new territory right now, though is a quick learner. Three of their new signings stand out: right-sided dribbler Leo Scienza (Ulm), teenage playmaker Paul Wanner (Bayern Munich) and the very technical centre-forward Maximilian Breunig (Freiburg).

An established top-six force in Portugal, **Vitoria Guimares** are remarkably the first Portuguese club to reach the Conference League proper. And no one can say they did not deserve it, winning all six of their qualification ties. Boss Rui Borges has a wealth of talent at his disposal, especially the Brazilian wingers Kaio Cesar and the newly-signed Gustavo Silva plus impressive homegrown defensive midfielder Tomas Handel.

DARK HORSES

If **Rapid Vienna**, the famous Old Lady of Austrian football – national champions on 32 occasions – are in their best shape for years, it's primarily down to an exceptional summer of new signings, in particular tremendously promising French centre-back Serge-Philippe Raux-Yao (ex-Rodez), dynamic ex-Red Bull Salzburg midfielder Mamadou Sangare, playmaker Louis Schaub – back at Rapid after spells in Germany and Switzerland – and exciting Croatian leader of the line Dion Drena Beljo, brought in on loan from Augsburg. Quantitatively and qualitatively, Rapid are much improved and head coach Robert Klauss appears to have discovered a better playing system, scrapping a 4-2-3-1 for a more fluid 4-2-2-2.

Good enough to record a 3-2 home victory over Premier League side Aston Villa in the group phase of last season's Conference League, **Legia Warsaw** are not a team to be taken lightly. They would love to make the short trip to Wroclaw for the final and, with the extremely creative Pawel Wszolek on the right wing and a backline of newly-arrived Spaniard Sergio Barcia, Rafal Augustyniak and veteran skipper Artur Jedrzejczyk, they have an experienced and combative side.

Fourth in the Turkish Super Lig last term, **Istanbul Basaksehir** can blow hot and cold in Europe – recording 22 wins and 21 defeats in their 59 continental jousts to date – but they certainly do know how to rise to the big occasion. In the 2019-20 season, they famously won away at Borussia Monchengladbach in the Europa League and a year later, on an unforgettable night in November 2020, beat Manchester United 2-1 in the Champions League. Current coach Cagdas Atan will be looking to Poland striker Krzysztof Piatek and winger Deniz Turuc to set the tone for a glory grab.

Austria ace...Louis Schaub is back at Rapid Vienna after six years abroad

Proven goalscorer ...Krzysztof Piatek

WHO'S WHO?

APOEL *(Cyprus)*
Astana *(Kazakhstan)*
Borac Banja Luka *(Bosnia & Herz)*
Celje *(Slovenia)*
Cercle Brugge *(Belgium)*
Chelsea *(England)*
Copenhagen *(Denmark)*
Dinamo Minsk *(Belarus)*
Djurgardens *(Sweden)*
Fiorentina *(Italy)*
Gent *(Belgium)*
Hearts *(Scotland)*
Heidenheim *(Germany)*
HJK *(Finland)*
Istanbul Basaksehir *(Turkey)*
Jagiellonia Bialystok *(Poland)*
Larne *(Northern Ireland)*
LASK *(Austria)*
Legia Warsaw *(Poland)*
Lugano *(Switzerland)*
Mlada Boleslav *(Czech Republic)*
Molde *(Norway)*
Noah *(Armenia)*
Olimpija Ljubljana *(Slovenia)*
Omonia Nicosia *(Cyprus)*
Pafos *(Cyprus)*
Panathinaikos *(Greece)*
Petrocub Hincesti *(Moldova)*
Rapid Vienna *(Austria)*
Real Betis *(Spain)*
Shamrock Rovers *(Rep of Ireland)*
St Gallen *(Switzerland)*
The New Saints *(Wales)*
TSC *(Serbia)*
Vikingur Reykjavik *(Iceland)*
Vitoria Guimaraes *(Portugal)*

POCKET ROCKET

The rise of England's diminutive new midfielder

Words: Ryan Baldi

When Lee Carsley named his first squad as England's interim manager in late August, there were several new faces included and, in particular, one surprise name. But for anyone who witnessed Angel Gomes' vast talents as he made his way through Manchester United's academy as a teenager, the only surprise back then would've been that his first senior international call-up would take so long to arrive.

The son of a former Portugal Under-21 international, and godson to ex-United winger Nani, Gomes signed for the Red Devils at the age of six. He consistently stood out as the top prospect in every age category through which he progressed until, aged just 16 years and 263 days, he became the youngest player to debut for the club since Duncan Edwards in 1953.

Standing just 5ft 6ins by the time he was fully grown, Gomes was always undersized. But it didn't matter. His skill, technique and invention stood out. He represented England at every age category between Under-16 and Under-21 and was widely regarded as one of the best prospects of the century to emerge from United's storied youth system.

"He is a brilliant kid and a brilliant footballer," Paul McGuinness, a former long-time youth coach at United, tells *World Soccer*. "He was always the smallest in the group, so he stood out even more. He was the smallest but he was the best. Luckily, he was at a club where skill was the main thing. Everybody was convinced he was going to be good enough. Technically, he was one of the best we ever had.

"We used to mix the age groups. You'd have the youngest ones in with the oldest ones and they'd play in a cage. Even when he was three, four, five years younger, he was the best, because it was skill that mattered in those games.

"When I left United, I did a *Sky* interview. He was close to the first team at the time and I was asked what he was like. I said that if he was Brazilian, everybody would be saying he's a wonderkid."

The man Gomes replaced when he came off the bench for his first-team debut against Crystal Palace in May 2017, in the process becoming the first player born this century to feature in a Premier League match, was none other than Wayne Rooney. By this time, Rooney was 31 and playing in what would be his final league game for the club before returning to Everton. It wasn't a stretch to view Gomes replacing the Old Trafford icon and record scorer as a passing of the torch.

But Gomes would make just four more Premier League appearances for United. The 2019-20 season was supposed to be his breakout campaign, yet the Carrington graduate played in just six games across all competitions. A free agent that summer, he turned down a contract offer from United and decided to seek opportunity elsewhere, joining French side Lille.

"After the conversations I had with the staff at Lille, it made the most sense for me to go there because I knew I was going to get more of an opportunity; there was something in place," Gomes told *The Athletic* in 2023. "At the time, United didn't give me the gist that was going to be the plan. I felt like I was just *there*."

McGuinness, who'd left United in 2016 after 26 years, believes Gomes fell victim to a club in a state of flux. Had his ascent to the first team come in a past era, things might have worked out differently for the youngster.

"I'd already left by then, but the club has been changing for quite a bit," he says. "There were a number of players back then who, if they'd been in and around the senior squad in a settled team, might have had a better chance. People like Angel play better with better players. That's why it'll be fascinating to see him with this England team."

He was immediately loaned to Boavista to further his development. And the consistent game time he saw in Portugal allowed Gomes to showcase his abilities, delivering six goals – including one spectacular strike from the halfway line – and three assists. He joined up with his new colleagues at Lille the following season before establishing himself as a regular starter for the Ligue 1 outfit in the 2022-23 campaign.

RKA
Le poêle autrichien
actual
LOSC
toulanger

Historic...Gomes replaces Wayne Rooney for his Manchester United debut

Key creator...Gomes assisted Jonathan David a Ligue 1 high six times last season

And for anyone who'd followed his development at United, the diminutive attacker's positional evolution has been fascinating. Having shone as both a winger and a No.10 at academy level, he has often thrived in a deeper role in France.

"I thought he was a winger, and he played there a bit, but he didn't really do much," Andrew Gibney, a French football expert and Lille supporter, says of the initial impression Gomes made at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy.

"When Paulo Fonseca came in [in 2022], [Gomes] played as a defensive midfielder alongside Benjamin Andre. He was a deep-lying playmaker, getting on the ball and pinging passes. Then we got Nabil Bentaleb last year and he played alongside Andre with Gomes going to the No.10. That's when you could see what Gomes could do. At the back end of last season, a lot of Jonathan David's goals came from Angel picking passes and finding little holes of space."

Although his return of two goals – both in the Europa Conference League – was modest, the 2023-24 season was the best of Gomes' young career to date. He provided a best-ever tally of eight league assists as Lille secured Champions League qualification via a top-four Ligue 1 finish. In terms of expected assisted goals, shot-creating actions and through balls, he was one of the most impressive young midfielders in France, yet Gibney believes there is still room for growth in the 24-year-old's game.

"There's no game where he's got more than one assist," he says. "There's no game against a big team where he's got a big goal or a big assist. Getting assists against Lorient and Clermont and Le Havre isn't what catches the attention.

"There was one assist against Lyon last year when we got beat, but there's been no big performance against Marseille, for example. That's what's lacking. He was unlucky last season because he missed the Aston Villa games in the Conference League. And we did miss him, because we had no one who could get on the ball and calm us down. Maybe that could have been his moment. I don't think he's had that moment yet."

Those moments, thus far, have been reserved for the youth international scene. Gomes captained the likes of Phil Foden, Callum Hudson-Odoi, Jadon Sancho and Morgan Gibbs-White in England's U17 World Cup triumph in 2017. And last summer, he was the literal centrepiece of a European Championship title for Lee Carsley's U21s.

> "People like Angel play better with better players. That's why it'll be fascinating to see him with this England team"
>
> **Ex-Manchester United youth coach Paul McGuinness**

"Lee played him as a playmaking midfield player in what would usually be considered the defensive midfield position – like other countries do with a Verratti or a Pirlo," McGuiness says. "That's the type of player that he is. Angel played as a No.6. That was a real statement.

"A lot of times, those players, because they've got the skills, they start up front. Paul Scholes started as a forward before he moved a bit deeper. In doing that, you have the benefit of timing. As a No.6, you have to stay behind the ball more; you don't get to learn the timing of running on the blind side of defenders and getting the connection with the passer. If you've done that and made those runs, when you drop further back you know what you're looking for from someone else."

And Gomes concurs that his adaptation to a deeper role has been informed and aided by his past playing further forward.

"It was creating triangles with them and creating ways to get my No.10 on the ball because when I play No.10, I want to be on the ball as much as possible," he explained of his role with the England U21s. "I want my midfielders to look at me because normally the No.10 is the link between the attackers."

A breakthrough at senior international level was the first chapter in what is set to be a pivotal season for Gomes, who will play in the Champions League with Lille as his contract with the Ligue 1 club runs into its final year.

An England debut has been a long time in the making, and he justified Carsley's faith in him with an assured cameo on his debut as a substitute against the Republic of Ireland in Dublin, before catching the eye in his first start against Finland. In the latter clash at Wembley, Gomes showed that he belonged at this level, knitting play together, keeping the ball well, showcasing his technique, making angles for passes and constantly probing.

If his upward trajectory continues throughout the 2024-25 campaign, Gomes could at last hit the heights he's long been expected to reach.

Full debut...after coming off the bench against the Republic of Ireland, Gomes started v Finland

HARRY KANE

"Give me the chances and I can put the ball in the net"

Harry Kane was the Premier League's top scorer on three occasions, but it was only after joining Bayern Munich and scoring 36 Bundesliga goals that he followed in the illustrious footsteps of Eusebio, Gerd Muller, Marco van Basten, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. After being presented with the 2023-24 Golden Shoe by the European Sports Media group, which includes *World Soccer*, the England captain discussed his new life in Germany

Congratulations, Harry. Is this a special moment in your career?
Yes, I feel good, I'm playing for one of the best clubs in the world, I feel physically and mentally at the top of my game so I hope to have many more years to score plenty of goals, give plenty of assists and win many more games.

I'm excited for where I am this season. There's a new energy in the building at Bayern and I'm looking forward to seeing what we can achieve this season.

How long did it take to recover from England's defeat in the Euro 2024 final?
When you lose a final like that it can take years to stop thinking about it, but at a certain point you start thinking about the new season and how we can get better from a club point of view. I'm always motivated to be better and improve.

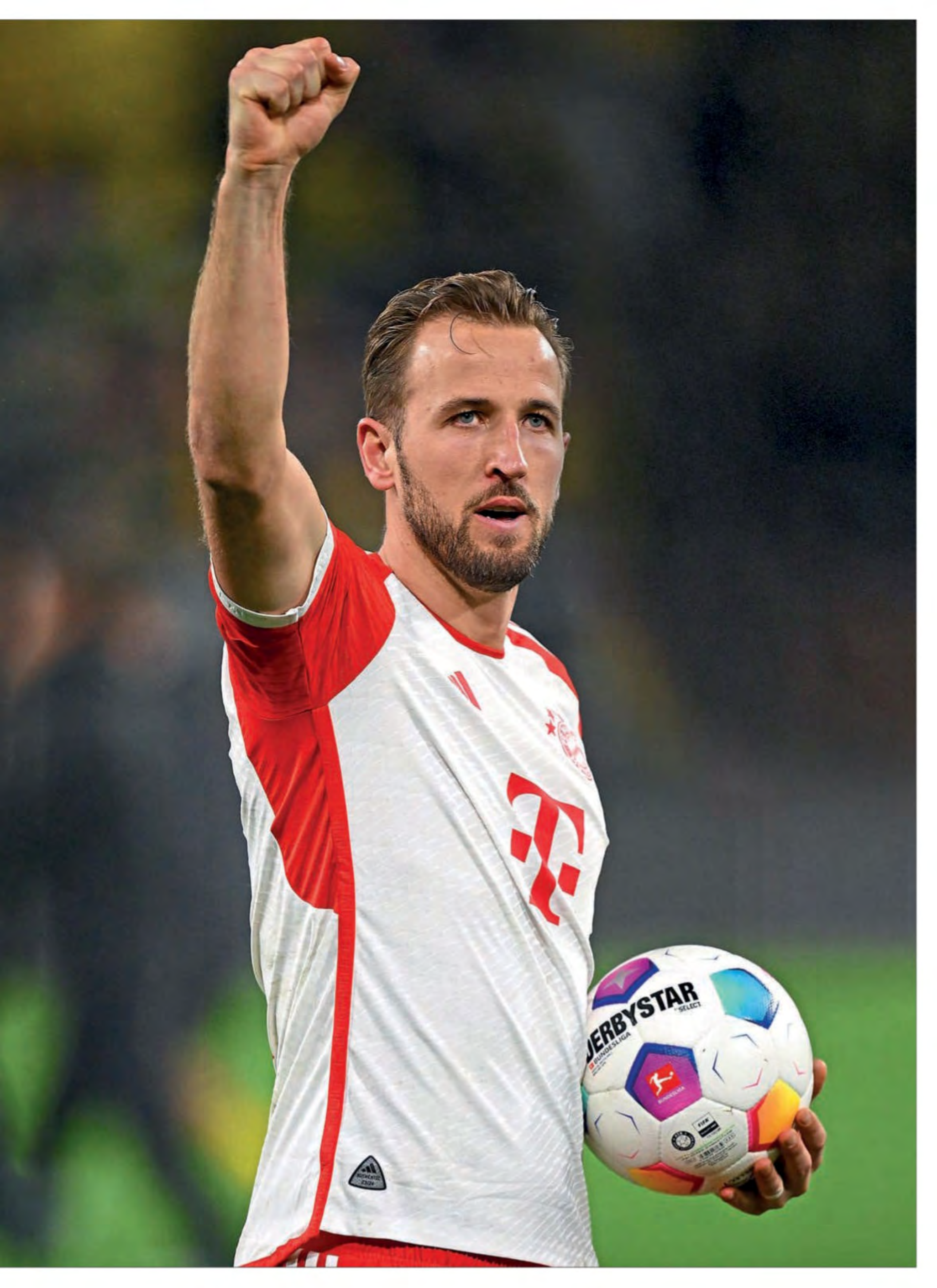
You have had an intense time for England with three major tournaments in three years as captain and top scorer. How do you view the future with a new manager?
I'm always looking forward to playing for England. It's something I'm extremely proud to do and that will never fade. Of course, we've just had another successful tournament but didn't get over the line so it's down to us to try to change that as a national team. It'll be strange without Gareth Southgate there in the camp, he was a huge part of our success, so I'm sure that will take a bit of getting used to but Lee Carsley has a great understanding of what this England team can do from his work with the Under-21s. I'm sure he'll bring his own energy into the senior team so I'm looking forward to that. The camps come around quick and I'm very proud to be starting the next journey to, hopefully, be successful in the World Cup.

What is your biggest challenge at club level to keep performing at such a high level in a different country?
Obviously coming here was my first experience of a big transfer and everything that goes into it. There were a lot of up and downs in that process and then things to sort out with my family moving and my kids coming over, but once I got here, in football terms, it was just about getting on the pitch and trying to focus on the team. I've always had a self-belief that I can always score goals. Give me the chances and I can put the ball in the net. I knew with the players we had I'd get those chances and, thankfully, the goals kept coming.

There's a lot of talk about different leagues and the Premier League was a big part of my career, but the Bundesliga has been a great test for me with so many good teams and players here. It's a great opportunity to show what I can do on both a European level and a world level. It speaks for the move itself and that it was a good move in my career.

How important is your family in all of this?
Everything. I wouldn't be standing here without them, for sure. Right back from when I was young with my parents taking me to training, my brother playing football with me in the garden. Now my wife, Kate, we've been together 13 years – we've known each other since school when we were five years old. She's the one who's there when things don't go so well and I've had a bad game or didn't score a goal. She can say stuff that not many others can. She's always there to support me and keep me grounded. We have four kids at home so once I'm home I'm a Dad and a husband, and that's the most important thing in the house.

Is there anything particularly German, maybe the cuisine, that you've discovered and appreciated?
Food-wise the pretzel bread is my favourite, to be honest, but I can't eat too much of it! We're learning stuff as we go along. The kids are picking up German much quicker than I am so I'm sure they'll be teaching me before I know it! I said when I came here I wanted to get to know the country and culture as much as we ➤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BUNDESLIGA

Reunited...Kane clashed with his new manager plenty of times

could and I think we're doing that. The longer we're here the more we'll get to know the country and Munich. So far, we've enjoyed it.

What is your immediate aim?
To continue how I started last year and hopefully to win the titles. We know last season we fell short of what we wanted to achieve as a team and I was part of that, so as great as these individual awards are we're all hungry to have that success as a team again. We have a great opportunity this year to do that and prove people wrong as well.

Do you think you can beat Robert Lewandowski's record of 41 goals in a Bundesliga season – is that on your mind?
That was an unbelievable record. It was spoken about a lot last season and it was hard to keep it out of my mind when I was asked about it

ESM Golden Shoe winner ...Kane with his trophy *Credit: Kicker/ Picture-Alliance/ Gottschalk*

Difficult summer... Kane walks past the European Championship trophy

Up and running...Kane scored his first league goal of the 2024-25 campaign with a penalty against Freiburg

after every game. At this stage in the season, it's not something I'm thinking about. For now it's just going game-by-game and scoring goals to help the team win matches. I like to set myself short-term targets, weekly and monthly, to get to certain points to help the team. If we were in April and we were close enough then it would be something I'd like to achieve but for now my focus is just on the short-term.

> "As great as these individual awards are we're all hungry to have that success as a team again"

How is it progressing with new coach Vincent Kompany?
Really good. I've been impressed with the energy he's brought. He has great respect from all the players not just for being the manager but the way he conducted himself when he was a player. A lot of us have played against him and know how tough he was and how passionate he was. He's brought a style which, as a player, is exciting. He wants us to be aggressive without the ball and I think we can only improve. The team is hungry, the coach is hungry, and that's a great place to be.

The Champions League final will be here in Munich next year. Can you say: "We must be there!" in German yet?
No, not really. I lost two months' German language practice over the summer but, hopefully, by the time we're there in the final in Munich I'll be able to talk in German about it!

What advice do you give to young people who look up to you?
Whenever I'm talking to young people growing up who want to be successful – not just in football but in life – there are two things I tell them that helped me get to where I am now. One is being willing to work harder than anyone else, being willing to work behind the scenes where no-one is watching, when it's raining, when it's tough, when you feel like there is no reward – those are the moments that build the resilience inside you. The other thing is belief. You must have self-belief because if you don't believe in yourself not many others will – your team-mates or coaches – so you have to have that from a young age and believe that you can go on and do what you want to do. I think those two things are the cement which got me to where I am now.

Interview courtesy of European Sports Media

ASHLEY WESTWOOD

"I didn't even know where Charlotte was, but it's been the best decision of my life"

The former Burnley and Aston Villa midfielder sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss his new life in MLS, rubbing shoulders with Lionel Messi, and what the future holds

You had a frustrating end to your time in England with an injury at Burnley. How did the move to Charlotte come about?
I obviously had the injury and I was close to calling it a day. I'd had enough. I was fed up with English football and the injury just topped it off. I got halfway through my rehabilitation and I was finding it really hard. The physio who worked with me was incredible, he kept me going. Towards the end of rehab, just as I was coming back to play for Burnley, this opportunity came about. I didn't even know where Charlotte was, but I jumped at it and it's been the best decision of my life, I'm not afraid to say it.

Had you considered a move to Major League Soccer before? And, off the pitch, how have you found life in Charlotte compared to in England?
I've always spoken about trying a different culture. I had Spain in my head, but then I had two children and realised it would be hard with the language for them. David Beckham getting the franchise in America got my attention. I've been to a lot of cities now and Charlotte is one of the best. Whenever we're on the road, even the lads say: 'We can't wait to get back to Charlotte'. It's a big city, but not too big. We've got a big lake, Lake Norman, just up the road. You can hire boats and go on there for the day. You've got the mountains two hours away and the coast three hours away. The weather is incredible, hot and humid in the summer and with mild winters. And the people are so friendly and welcoming. I could be a travel agent for the city!

What's your assessment of the standard in MLS? How does it compare to the Championship and Premier League?
It's really tough. I speak with [team-mate] Nathan Byrne about it a lot, as he's played in the Championship. It's very similar, it's a physical league, it's intense and everyone's fit. But we obviously have the Designated Players, and they're incredible. They're like Premier League quality and they're usually all at the top end of the pitch. That makes the difference. It's like Championship level but with a sprinkle of Premier League quality, so it's a very tough league.

Premier League fans will remember you as a deep-lying midfielder, dictating the play. Are you the same in MLS or have you adapted your game?
I'm very similar. This year we have Dean Smith [in charge], who's been unbelievable, a breath of fresh air. Now it's a bit more suited to my style. I drop into the back two and dictate play from there. I'm thoroughly enjoying it. It's the Michael Carrick role, who I based my career on. Keeping the ball moving and dictating the play. That's the way I like to play and we're doing that now.

What's the stadium like? Is it odd playing in an NFL stadium, with the top tier of the ground not always in use?
The first game of the 2024 season we opened the top tier and I think we got 63,000. We played Inter Miami in the last game of last season to get into the play-offs and we had around 75,000 there. It doesn't feel like an NFL stadium, it's incredible. We've got a passionate supporters section behind the goal, who are just wild. There are drums going and it's a special atmosphere. They've done a good job because it doesn't feel forced, it feels natural. It's more of a party atmosphere than in England, where you always feel like it's on edge. ➤

CHARLOTTE
FOOTBALL CLUB
ally

"Breath of fresh air"...Dean Smith

The World Cup will be coming to the States in 2026. Do you get a sense of football really growing as a sport there?
It's huge. I've got two kids who play football and they're at local clubs. The facilities are incredible. It took me by surprise by how many kids play football, as I thought it would be more NFL.

It's got the potential to really take off and compete with Europe. A lot of teams also have football-specific stadiums and fill them out each week. The new St Louis stadium, which is a brand-new club, is getting over 20,000 a week, so it's a growing sport and the World Cup will make a huge difference.

You never crossed paths with Dean Smith at Aston Villa, but how have you found working under him so far at Charlotte? How he does compare to other managers you've worked with?
I've got a mutual friend who knew him very well, so I spoke to him and did some groundwork on him before he got the job. He's incredible, just the way he interacts with everyone. Everyone's on board and willing to work hard for each other. That has been the biggest thing he's brought. He's very similar to Sean Dyche in the way he works and how he wants us to play. Steve Bruce was also a great guy. He's a mix between Steve Bruce and Sean Dyche. He's a great man and I can't speak highly enough of him.

Do you have any ambitions to go into coaching yourself when you retire?
I think I would rather do the academy, or the bridge between the academy and first team, helping the young lads and seeing them develop. We've got a young kid in now, Nimfasha Berchimas, who made his debut this season at 16. Me and Nathan Byrne are constantly talking to him and giving him tips. We're sort of doing that role now and I think that's what I would like to do in the future – even at this club. We've got a brand-new academy, which hasn't been going long, and I'd love to add my input and help out there. I've grown up doing what I'm told and doing everything by the book, and that's what gets you there.

What are your aims for the rest of the 2024 campaign?
This is only our third year as a football club, which is a big difference to England where clubs have been around for years. We've finished ninth [in the Eastern Conference] both years, but last year they changed the format so we got into the play-offs. I think to get into the play-offs this year would be huge again for the club and then we are slowly setting the foundations. I think we have the right man in charge to take us on.

Iconic...Westwood shakes hands with Lionel Messi ahead of Charlotte's meeting with Inter Miami last season

Captain fantastic ...Westwood in MLS action for Charlotte FC

There have been some marquee arrivals to MLS since you joined. Was it surreal finishing above a team that had the likes of Lionel Messi and Sergio Busquets?
We played against Inter Miami in the last game of last season and we needed to win to secure the play-offs, and we beat them. Lionel Messi turned up and filled the stadium as all the fans wanted to see him. It was an unbelievable occasion. I was captain and he was captain so I was face-to-face with the best player in the world – and probably the best player to ever play the game. I've played against some unbelievable players in England but even at his age now, he's on a different planet. He sees things you think are impossible. We've got a picture shaking hands before the game and my little boy has it as a screensaver on his phone. We play football to play against the best in the world and thankfully I've played against Cristiano Ronaldo when he was at Manchester United and now Messi. I can tell the grandchildren that I've played against two of the best players that have ever played the game.

> "I can tell the grandchildren that I've played against two of the best players that have ever played the game"

Are you hoping to stay at Charlotte beyond 2024?
I'm here for the long run. It's a very special club – it's grabbed mine and my family's heart – and we want to be here for the long-term. I'll even help the kit man if it keeps me at the club, that's how special it is! I can't speak highly enough of it. I've got an option after this year, which hopefully they take on, and that will keep me for another year playing. But I want to play until I'm 40. The move has rejuvenated me, and given me a new lease of life. I feel fit so hopefully I can keep performing well and they'll keep me here for many years to come.

Interview by Jared Tinslay

ON THE MARCH

Why York United are the poster boys for Canadian Premier League ambition

Words: Danny Lewis

As Canada's impressive Copa America campaign – in which they defied the odds to reach the semi-finals – drew to a close, both head coach Jesse Marsch and talismanic Porto midfielder Stephen Eustaquio referenced how important the Canadian Premier League (CPL) can be for the national team ahead of co-hosting the 2026 World Cup.

There is also the feeling that the excitement surrounding 2026 can help the CPL, and York United are potentially the embodiment of that on and off the pitch right now.

Canada co-hosting the World Cup is an opportunity to strengthen the nation's footballing infrastructure, and York's new ownership group – fronted by Mexican brothers Eduardo, Ricardo and Miguel Pasquel – is certainly looking to do that for their club as it currently plays at Toronto's York Lions Stadium – a university ground that hosts Canadian football among other sports.

"We're exploring every possible angle, talking to as many people as we can about a potential new stadium – especially as the World Cup is coming in a couple of years," Ricardo tells *World Soccer*. "We are exploring every corner in Toronto for a new stadium with a full football field specifically built for that."

They are on a similar mission when it comes to the training ground. Having taken over in November 2023, the Pasquels feel they are in the perfect place to be putting in this kind of work, due to "the potential Canada has in the game from every possible angle", while the nation's growth ahead of 2026 is a key factor in their interest.

Pasquel continues: "It's even more responsibility but at the same time there's a trust from our group and from the CPL that we're doing a good job. It's very exciting and it's a privilege."

Many others will also be excited about those developments and Frank Sturing is among them. Born in the Netherlands to a Dutch mother and Canadian father, the 27-year-old centre-back had played his entire career in Europe (with NEC Nijmegen and Den Bosch in the Netherlands and SV Horn in Austria) and represented Canada's national team twice in 2021, as well as being in their CONCACAF Gold Cup squad that same year.

"I spoke to a couple of clubs in Europe, but also a lot of clubs here in Canada," Sturing tells *World Soccer* of his January move. "I'm Canadian, I was always interested in making a move and I felt like it was the right time. So, I spoke to a lot of clubs here in the CPL, and in the end I had the best feeling about York United."

The improvement of infrastructure within both the club and the league are something he has noticed. "I feel like the league is growing fast, and one of those things is getting more stadiums, better stadiums. It's encouraging and it will be exciting to see where they'll be in a couple of years. I think it'll be in a good place."

As commendable and vital as building a club's infrastructure is, the reality is that results on the pitch will be what ultimately decides whether or not a club will be viewed as a success by those looking from the outside in.

As in Major League Soccer, the eight-team CPL is divided between a regular league campaign – with the team that finishes top awarded the CPL Shield – before a play-off system determines the league champions. Before 2024, York's highest finish in the regular season was third and they

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Ambitious...York United defender Frank Sturing

York United boss ...Benjamin Mora

had made the play-offs twice in the league's five seasons but never reached the final.

They had also never been top of the CPL table at any stage of a season, but having lost half of their eight opening matches before Benjamin Mora's arrival as manager, a run of just one defeat in ten under the Mexican changed that.

It was a 1-0 victory over Valour in mid-August that took them to the summit, albeit briefly. For Sturing, there is plenty more to come: "We haven't shown the real York United yet, but I think we're getting better and better, and slowly we're getting on the level we need to be. Hopefully we can surprise in the last 20 games and compete for the championship."

Pasquel agrees. "It's being not just champions in CPL but doing a great job in the CONCACAF Champions Cup and win that one day," he declared as his ambition. "We know maybe right now, honestly, we're far away but with good quality investment, with a good plan, with how the CPL is going to grow two, three, four years down the road, you may not be surprised if Canadian teams challenge MLS teams and Mexican teams. We truly believe it because the talent is here."

While CONCACAF Champions Cup glory is undeniably a long way off, the Toronto-based club has proven that they can compete at the top end of the CPL table and have a realistic chance of winning their first piece of silverware.

In doing so, they are also offering a platform for players to show that they can make the steps needed to eventually represent Canada. "That's a goal and was also one of the reasons I came here to York and to the CPL, to get me a little bit more on the radar again with the national team," Sturing says. "Football is growing a lot in Canada, the national team is getting better, and, of course, with the World Cup coming up in 2026, that's a dream for everyone and it's a dream for me."

The defender admits, though, that making the jump from the CPL to international football is unlikely. Realistically, a move to Major League Soccer (Canada has three clubs, CF Montreal, Toronto FC and Vancouver Whitecaps, in MLS) will be the best way to catch the attention of Canada boss Jesse Marsch.

"I feel like the CPL has to keep growing in order for players to get called up [for Canada]. Right now it's a little bit far to get called up if you play in the CPL. Hopefully soon we will be able to get called up from the CPL for the national team."

Even with much of the focus being on helping Canadians progress to that point, foreign influences can still play an important role in that development across the league. In addition to York's Mexican owners, Atletico Ottawa are owned by La Liga giants Atletico Madrid and Pacific have a partnership with Bundesliga side Bochum.

"It's amazing and it's taking advantage of these opportunities," Pasquel enthuses. "All of the ownership groups at the eight teams right now, they are business people, they are soccer people. We know what we have to do to grow the game and building on this kind of stuff, it's exactly what we need moving forward."

Focusing on the impact that development can have, he adds: "I'm excited about this opportunity and truly believe in when the Canadian Premier League is more established, when the quality of the players starts going up, when we fully invest in the talent, identifying them and putting in the time to help them develop, what this can become. That's the main purpose of why we're here and we want to be here for the ride."

As somebody who has plenty of experience of playing in Europe, Sturing adds: "Football is growing in Canada and getting better but other countries are still a little bit ahead. So, I think all the experience and all the other insights from other countries can help grow the league and football in Canada."

Even so, he states: "I have to say, it's going well already. I think in the league and football in Canada in general, if you look to the national team as well, it's grown so much and has so many good players."

For now, the strong Mexican presence helping York extends to the playing squad, but Pasquel is aiming for a different look to his team in the coming years, being keen to offer a platform to more homegrown players.

"Hopefully, down the road we'll have a full Canadian roster because we truly believe the talent is here," he says. "We truly believe in the investment we should make by identifying young talent, helping their development, helping them be the most professional they can be and ready for when they start playing."

> **"Hopefully, down the road we'll have a full Canadian roster because we truly believe the talent is here"**
>
> **York United co-owner Ricardo Pasquel**

That belief is further enhanced by the area York is in. "Toronto is a city where, hopefully down the road, we get two, three, four, five more professional teams because you have the population," Pasquel states. "If we do the good job I think we're doing at

On the up...York United players celebrate a goal

Club owners...the Pasquel brothers at their first York United press conference

building the club, being the standard in the area, being the club that kids look up to, that people look up to, we can be that great club in the future and that's what we're trying to build right now."

Building is the key word for York both on and off the pitch. The results have already come in the short-term, but the work is being put in now to ensure they make the most of a defining moment in Canada's football history.

"It's a daily thing that all clubs need to be, and are, doing to make sure we're ready," says Pasquel. "It's about making sure everybody knows about the league and the potential it has."

COLOMBIA

Back in Colombia... national team legend Radamel Falcao in action for Millonarios

2024-25 TEAMS

- Aguilas Doradas
- Alianza
- America de Cali
- Atletico Bucaramanga
- Atletico Nacional
- Boyaca Chico
- Deportes Tolima
- Deportivo Cali
- Deportivo Pasto
- Deportivo Pereira
- Envigado
- Fortaleza
- Independiente Medellin
- Jaguares
- Junior
- La Equidad
- Millonarios
- Once Caldas
- Patriotas
- Santa Fe

CATEGORIA PRIMERA A – A BRIEF HISTORY

Formed in 1948, Colombia's professional league was arguably the strongest in the world in the *"El Dorado"* period of 1949-53. By illegally poaching players, clubs seduced stars – most famously Alfredo Di Stefano – with fat signing-on fees to play in the pirate league. Three decades later, the league had its second controversial moment in the sun. Under the grip of ruthless drug barons, stars arrived, stadiums were filled and rivalries were forged between the country's big three: America de Cali, Millonarios and Atletico Nacional, with the latter becoming the first Colombian club to win the Copa Libertadores in 1989. However, as football became entangled in the blood-soaked era, a referee was murdered on the orders of Pablo Escobar and the league was cancelled that year. In recent times, Colombian clubs have found it hard to compete at South America's top table, with no side progressing beyond the last eight since Nacional won their second Copa in 2016.

THE FORMAT

Still following the Apertura-Clausura format of two tournaments held annually, both championships see Colombia's 20 top-flight clubs play each other once before the top eight teams advance to a final stage. Winners of each of the four-team groups then meet in a two-legged final with both Apertura (January to June) and Clausura (July to December) champions earning a league title. Relegation is determined through a convoluted three-year average point system with the worst two sides demoted to the 16-team second division, which is Colombia's lowest professional step, at the end of the year. Pressure is growing to switch to a year-long tournament and a straight two-down relegation.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
Atletico Nacional	17	12	2022 (Apertura)
Millonarios	16	10	2023 (Apertura)
America de Cali	15	7	2020 (one season only)
Deportivo Cali	10	14	2021 (Clausura)
Junior	10	10	2023 (Clausura)

Do the recent big-name signings of national team legends Radamel Falcao and David Ospina suggest that the league is getting stronger?
The return of idols from the 2014 World Cup generation have undoubtedly injected new interest in a league that remains largely invisible for most Colombians behind a pay-per-view TV wall. Falcao's arrival at his boyhood club Millonarios was particularly spectacular, as fans snapped up all 33,000 season tickets the Bogota club put on sale – a first in Colombian football history. Barranquilla club Junior, usually the most willing to splash big cash on bombastic signings, hoped to achieve a similar frenzy when they asked about free agent James Rodriguez, but he told them he wasn't yet ready to go home and instead joined Rayo Vallecano.

Some returnees have undoubtedly had a positive effect, with former Wigan and Fulham forward Hugo Rodallega and ex-Sevilla and Milan striker Carlos Bacca continuing to plunder the goals. But with nearly all the returning stars in their late 30s and Falcao's contract only six months long, the general feeling is that most players have simply opted for one last swansong to neatly bookend their career. Bringing back the stars has created headlines, but this isn't really part of a serious medium-term project.

Does it in fact suggest that talent is not coming through?
Colombia has demonstrated over the last few years that its business model is to produce players for stronger leagues, and it does it very well. According to a recent report by CIES Football Observatory, Colombia was the third-biggest talent-exporting nation outside Europe. In fact, over the last few years, the number of Colombians playing abroad has only been increasing. Not all play at the highest level, but scouts know Colombia is a strong market that offers better value than Argentina or Brazil. From grassroots to professional level, Colombia's football infrastructure is built with this objective in mind.

Some clubs like Envigado, where the likes of James, Jhon Duran and Juan Fernando Quintero emerged, have been in the top flight since 2007 yet have no real ambition of winning the league; they exist simply to churn out talent.

Can a Colombian team win the Copa Libertadores once again?
We might see the odd isolated case of a Colombian team bucking the trend, but it's unlikely that there will be significant improvement. No Colombian team has made it to the semi-finals of the Copa Libertadores in the last eight editions of South America's premier club competition.

ONE TO WATCH

Nicolas RODRIGUEZ

(Fortaleza)

Having left his hometown as a young boy, Rodriguez initially struggled to adapt to life in Bogota with Fortaleza and considered giving up football two years ago. "I felt exhausted, things weren't working out," the 20-year-old admitted. Fortunately, he had a change of heart. This season he's been outstanding for the newly promoted high-flying side. From the right wing, he uses his wand-like left foot to pinpoint passes and crosses with a deftness that James Rodriguez would be proud of. The goal he scored against Independiente Medellin at the end of August, nutmegging his opponent before tucking it into the bottom corner, was one of the goals of the season.

Celebrity signing... Falcao is unveiled to the Millonarios crowd

Yet again, this season's results didn't live up to expectations. Atletico Nacional were crushed 4-0 on aggregate by Nacional (Paraguay) in the qualifiers – where Aguilas Doradas also lost on penalties to Brazil's Red Bull Bragantino – Millonarios finished bottom of their group without a win and Carlos Bacca's Junior were beaten comfortably by Chile's Colo-Colo in the last 16. The arrival of a handful of veteran players on short-term deals is unlikely to change that.

Competing with the superior financial muscle of Brazilian and Argentinian teams is a problem for all of South America, but the debate continues as to why Colombia – with the second largest population on the continent – has consistently underachieved. Unless serious structural problems are addressed, recent history is likely to be repeated.

Why are Colombian teams repeatedly struggling to compete?
The main issue is the way TV money and, essentially, power is distributed between Colombia's 36 professional clubs. When sports channel WinSports was created in 2012, two categories of teams were created: so-called "historic teams", who would take a larger equal slice of the TV pie, and the smaller clubs able to acquire historic status by achieving three consecutive seasons in the first division. The quirk is that you never lose your top-level status meaning that 70 per cent of all Colombian teams currently receive the same $1.25m a year for broadcasting rights. Atletico Nacional, with two Copa Libertadores and 17 league titles, receive the same TV cash as Real Cartagena who have spent the last 12 seasons in the second division, or La Equidad who don't have 200 fans to rub together. No other factor such as a club's TV ratings or their performance that season is considered.

Top clubs argue they are being unfairly held back. Compared to the rest of the continent, the difference is stark. For example, in Brazil, Flamengo's TV income was $55m in 2023 with Chile's Colo-Colo earning $6m. Even top clubs in Ecuador and Peru pocket around four times as much. This, in part, explains why big clubs have instead opted to lean upon powerful sponsors or local businessmen to fund big-name signings like Falcao – Colombian brewery Andino is paying for most of his salary – to boost income through season tickets and merchandise. The current TV deal is up for renewal in 2026, however, so we could be set for a shake-up.

Carl Worswick

Glenn Moore

New season set to get underway

A look ahead to the 2024-25 campaign across Europe's five major leagues

The champions of Europe's top five leagues each retained their title last season, which is unhealthy given a sense of jeopardy is at the core of any sport.

However, three of those title-holders have new coaches this campaign, and while no one expects Barcelona to be deposed any time soon there may be changes elsewhere as Lyon and Chelsea adjust to new management.

At Barca, continuity is the theme with Pere Romeu stepping up from assistant to replace Jonatan Giraldez, now at Washington Spirit. The "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" principle looks likely to apply on the pitch too with minimal squad changes. Veteran right-back Lucy Bronze has returned to England, joining Chelsea, winger Mariona Caldentey left for Arsenal, and goalkeeper Sandra Panos has gone to Club America in Mexico with Manchester City's Ellie Roebuck replacing her.

Striker Ewa Pajor has also arrived, from Wolfsburg. After finishing on the losing side in three Champions League finals, including in 2023 to her new club, the 27-year-old Poland international is hoping the switch brings that elusive winners' medal.

Real Madrid, who finished 15 points adrift of Barcelona last season, will be aiming to mount a closer challenge this time after an overhaul that includes the arrivals of Melanie Leupolz (Chelsea), Filippa Angeldahl (Man City) and 2023 World Cup winners Eva Navarro (Atletico Madrid) and Alba Redondo (Levante).

Centre-back Lauren, who impressed for Brazil at the Paris Olympics, is one of Atletico Madrid's key signings, though after falling at the first qualifying hurdle in the Champions League, beaten on penalties by Norway's Rosenborg, their season is off to a bad start.

The big spenders in the summer transfer window, FIFA revealed, were English clubs. Up to the start of September, £5.18 million had been spent on international moves in the women's game, more than double the previous year; WSL clubs accounted for £1.78m with a net expenditure of around £1m.

French clubs benefited most from cross-border sales, realising £570,000 in profit, closely followed by those from Portugal and Sweden.

Chelsea's new manager Sonia Bompastor went back to France, but not to her old club Lyon, instead raiding Paris Saint-Germain for Sandy Baltimore and Oriane Jean-Francois. Among many departures, Fran Kirby, so long the creative hub, left for Brighton along with Jelena Cankovic; England's Jess Carter and Germany's Ann-Katrin Berger went to NWSL club Gotham City, and Maren Mjelde returned to Norway with Arna-Bjornar.

Chelsea have won the last five titles, but their supremacy is fragile. The highest margin was 2.2 points (the PPG in COVID-truncated 2019-20) and they only edged Manchester City on goal difference last season.

City have added the WSL's all-time record goalscorer Vivianne Miedema, surprisingly allowed to leave Arsenal on a free at 28, highly-rated defender Naomi Layzell from Bristol City, plus Japanese internationals Aoba Fujino, Ayaka Yamashita, and Risa Shimizu. The latter, having played every minute for West Ham United last year, is likely to settle the quickest of the *Nadeshiko* trio.

FA Cup winners Manchester United have added experienced Dutch defender Dominique Janssen (Wolfsburg), Brighton's prolific Elisabeth Terland and Norwegian team-mate Celine Bizet (Tottenham), but lost a key trio in talismanic goalkeeper Mary Earps (PSG), captain Katie Zelem (Angel City) and Lucia Garcia (who scored twice at Wembley) to Mexico's Monterrey.

Among other new WSL signings, Arsenal hope Daphne van Domselaar (Aston Villa) solves their long-running goalkeeper problem, Liverpool smashed their transfer record with £210,000 Canadian Olivia Smith (Sporting), and Spurs added Australians Clare Hunt (PSG) and Hayley Raso (Real Madrid).

There is also ambition in the second-tier Championship, notably at London City Lionesses under the ownership of Michele Kang who also controls Washington Spirit and Lyon. Besides the shock poaching of PSG coach Jocelyn Precheur, they have signed Sweden's Kosovare Asllani to join former England striker Danielle Carter and Irish quartet Megan Campbell, Grace Moloney, Ruesha Littlejohn and Niamh Farrelly.

In France, Fabrice Abriel left Fleury to replace Precheur as PSG boss and

> The big spenders in the transfer window, FIFA revealed, were English clubs. Up to the start of September, £5.18m had been spent on international moves

German champions... Bayern Munich will seek to defend the Frauen-Bundesliga

Surprise signing... Vivianne Miedema was unexpectedly released by Arsenal

become their fifth coach in four years.

Although Lyon finished 11 points clear in 2023-24, PSG loanee Tabitha Chawinga was the league's top scorer, so the French champions signed the free-scoring Malawian ahead of their first season under former Arsenal and Juventus boss Joe Montemurro.

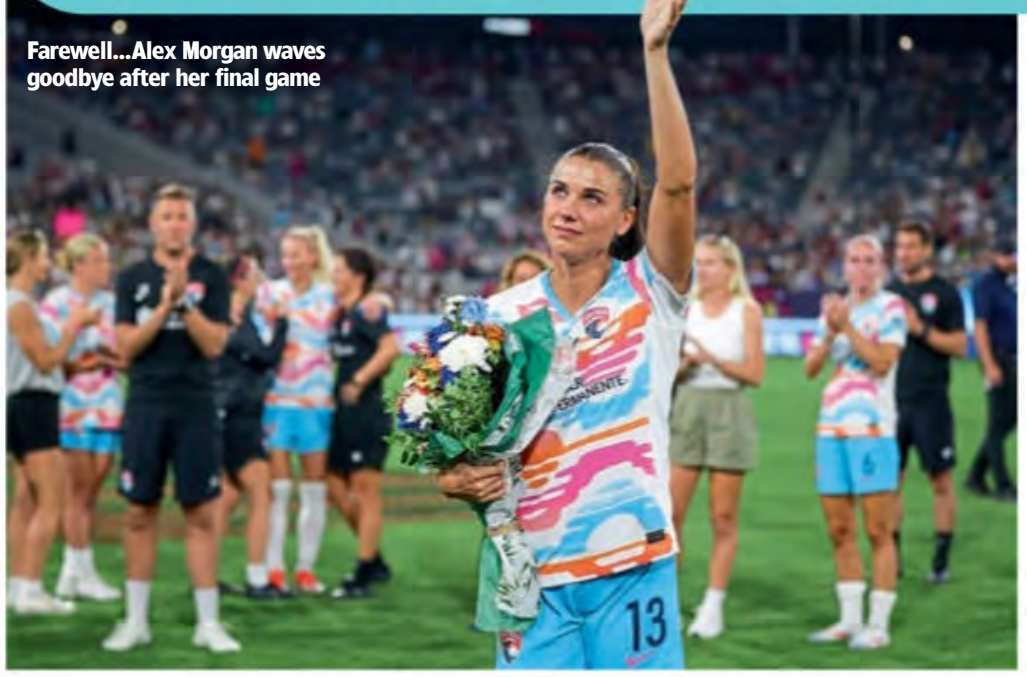
In Germany, the key transfer looked to be Lena Oberdorf leaving former champions Wolfsburg for the team that usurped them, Bayern Munich, but the holding midfielder suffered a serious injury in July. Janina Minge, signed from Freiburg to replace her at the Lady Wolves, also took her national team place and shone at the Olympics. Maybe their manager Tommy Stroot, who has also brought in Lineth Beerensteyn (Juventus), will sign off by bringing the title back in his final season at the club.

Beerensteyn's old team are desperate to regain their hegemony in Italy and have had a major overhaul. Among the recruits are Sweden's Hanna Bennison (Everton) and Emma Kullberg (Brighton), Milan captain Valentina Bergamaschi and high-profile Switzerland forward Alisha Lehmann (Aston Villa).

Roma, who finished 11 points clear of Juve, have signed France's combative Hawa Cissoko (West Ham) and, on loan from Barcelona, Giulia Dragoni, already in double figures for Italy caps aged 17.

Barcelona star... Aitana Bonmati recently signed a new deal with the Spanish champions

Round-up



Farewell...Alex Morgan waves goodbye after her final game

US ICON MORGAN RETIRES

After a stellar career including two World Cups, an Olympic gold medal and a host of other club, international and individual honours, USA striker Alex Morgan played her final game in San Diego Wave's NWSL meeting with North Carolina Courage.

The striker was denied a fairy-tale send-off when Courage keeper Casey Murphy produced an excellent penalty save in the tenth minute. Morgan was substituted as the clock passed 13 minutes – a reference to the shirt number she has worn for the majority of her career – to a standing ovation from supporters, both sets of players and the dugouts.

Morgan, who scored 123 goals in 224 USA caps, ended her career shortly after learning that she is pregnant with her second child.

USL SUPER LEAGUE MAKES WAVES, INCLUDING IN NWSL

The new USL Super League made an instant impact, and not just in impressive early crowds headlined by Carolina Ascent drawing 10,553 in Charlotte – topping anything managed by two-time NWSL champions North Carolina Courage in their seven years in the state.

Within days of USL's opening weekend, the NWSL announced a renegotiated collective bargaining agreement with their players' union scrapping the draft (a feature typical of US pro sports but unknown anywhere else) and ending the right of clubs to trade (transfer) players without their consent.

The deal had long been in the offing, not least to enable NWSL to compete with European leagues, but both features are part of USL and the new league's arrival does seem to have accelerated the process.

Inaugural edition...Monterrey take on Tigres UANL in the CONCACAF W Champions Cup

Minimum annual salaries will rise from $42,500 in 2025 to $82,500 by 2030. The current average US wage is $63,800.

CONTINENTAL COMPETITIONS BEGIN IN ASIA AND CONCACAF

After several trial events, the inaugural Asian Champions League kicked off in August with 21 of the AFC's 47 member nations entering a team.

The preliminary stage, hosted by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Malaysia and Bhutan, produced four group winners from 13 clubs. They joined eight automatic qualifiers to make three four-team groups to be hosted in China, Thailand and Vietnam, from October 3-12. Eight clubs will progress to a single-leg quarter-final round.

Each club will receive at least US$100,000 with the winners earning a minimum US$1.3m. Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds and Incheon Red Angels of South Korea are the early favourites.

Meanwhile, the CONCACAF W Champions Cup also began its inaugural campaign in August. Two five-team groups will run to the end of October with the top two of each reconvening in May 2025 for a last-four stage, likely to feature clubs from USA and Mexico, who each have three entrants each.

18+

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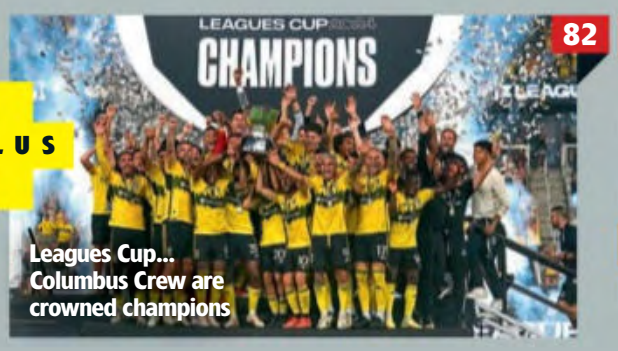
JAMES NALTON
Leagues Cup
82

STEVE MENARY
Oceania 2026 World Cup qualifiers & Papua New Guinea
86 88

MARK GLEESON
Egypt

84

PLUS



Leagues Cup... Columbus Crew are crowned champions
82

NEWS

82 Leagues Cup
84 Egypt: 2023-24 Egyptian Premier League
86 Oceania 2026 World Cup qualifiers
88 Papua New Guinea

RESULTS, TABLES, FIXTURES

90 Internationals
95 Club football

2026 World Cup qualifying...crunch time in Oceania
86

United States & Canada

JAMES NALTON

Another trophy for MLS's finest

Columbus Crew reaffirmed their status as best in class at the 2024 Leagues Cup, yet doubts remain about the tournament's value

The 2024 Leagues Cup saw another marker added to the timeline of Columbus Crew's development under head coach Wilfried Nancy, further cementing their status as one of the top teams in the Americas. In the process, the Crew contributed a wider narrative to this year's Leagues Cup that was otherwise missing from this contentious new tournament that pits MLS against Liga MX.

Nancy's team added this trophy to the MLS Cup they won last year and their CONCACAF Champions Cup final appearance in June. It also confirmed Cucho Hernandez as one of the region's standout players. He scored twice and assisted a third in a man-of-the-match performance in the final against Los Angeles FC, after which he was also named the tournament's best player.

Last year's Leagues Cup was the Lionel Messi show, after the Argentine made his debut in American soccer against Mexican side Cruz Azul in

Leagues Cup champions... Columbus Crew celebrate with the trophy

the group stage and his Inter Miami team went on to lift the trophy. But after he picked up an injury in this summer's Copa America, this year's edition had to find something else to carry it. Luckily, it found the Crew.

Much of the 2024 Leagues Cup was defined by controversy. As a fairly new tournament placed in the middle of the domestic season, it took the blame for MLS's withdrawal of 18 of 26 eligible teams from its domestic cup competition, the US Open Cup. The league cited schedule congestion as one of the reasons for not competing in the Open Cup but at the same time took all of its teams out of domestic play for a month for this tournament. There were fan protests and even Leagues Cup boycotts on the back of this.

The entire Leagues Cup being hosted in the United States and Canada is also controversial as this puts the Mexican teams at a disadvantage. It makes any MLS v Liga MX assessments more difficult as the tournament is heavily weighted towards the American and Canadian teams. This disadvantage for one league also raises questions as to the integrity of the tournament as a path to Champions Cup qualification.

Player of the Tournament... Cucho Hernandez

Impressive coach ...Wilfried Nancy

The finalists and the third-place play-off winners qualify for the 2025 Champions Cup but, as it turned out, no Mexican teams made it past the quarter-finals. For the second year running, each of the three Champions Cup qualifiers came from MLS.

Even though this tournament was further confirmation of the rise of Nancy's Columbus Crew to the top of North American soccer, it was a pity that the format didn't give them a single match-up against Liga MX opposition. They are a team that transcends MLS and one of the best in CONCACAF. Putting this to the test, as happened in the Champions Cup earlier in the year, would have been intriguing.

As reigning champions from their respective leagues, the Crew and Club America received byes to the knockout stages but America suffered defeat on penalties to Colorado Rapids in the quarter-finals.

Putting the top four seeded Mexican sides in local hubs in the US eased their travel burden, but Monterrey and Chivas didn't even make it out of their groups, Tigres UANL were knocked out in the last 16 by New York City after their hub privileges expired, and America exited on penalties in that match with Colorado.

For the Rapids, the tournament served as a sign of their improvement under head coach Chris Armas. Unlike Columbus, they faced plenty of Liga MX opposition, knocking out Juarez and Toluca as well as America before losing to LAFC in the semis. Securing Champions Cup qualification by defeating Philadelphia Union in the third-place play-off gave them something to show for their recent progress having finished bottom of MLS's Western Conference as recently as 2023 before the arrival of Armas.

The Crew's seeding also gave them home games throughout. Victory in the final was their 29th win in 43 home games under Nancy in which they have lost just twice, and this home support came in handy. It helped spur a comeback from 2-0 down with an hour played to win 3-2 against defending champions Inter Miami in the last 16, and was also useful during a penalty-shootout win against New York City in the quarter-final.

> **This tournament was further confirmation of the rise of Wilfried Nancy's Columbus Crew to the top of North American soccer**

Elsewhere, amid controversy and empty-looking stadiums at some games, the Leagues Cup showed that some Liga MX v MLS matchups retain an appeal. There were 50,675 spectators at Levi's Stadium to watch Chivas play San Jose Earthquakes in the group stage, which was almost 20,000 more than had turned out for a friendly between Chelsea and Wrexham at the same stadium a few days earlier.

In the Messi and Miami era, crowds are expected to flock to matches, but in Messi's absence that's not always the case. The question then for MLS and the Leagues Cup tournament it organises is: what else is there? The answer is a potential all-time great MLS team that has stepped up to Miami's level, and more. In situations like this, MLS, and the Leagues Cup, are lucky to have the Columbus Crew.

Egypt

MARK GLEESON

The Egyptian kings

Al Ahly continue their reign as the dominant force of Egyptian and African football after sweeping to yet another domestic league title

Review

For yet another season, the all-conquering dynasty that is Al Ahly came out tops in Egypt and indeed in the African continent, sweeping all before them despite an extraordinarily lengthy and exhausting campaign.

The Cairo giants won the African Champions League in May but only finished their domestic season in mid-August, taking the Egyptian Premier League title by six points from runners-up Pyramids.

It was their 44th title, 30 more than their arch-rivals and nearest historical challengers Zamalek who have won 14 championships.

Having needed to catch up on their fixture list after many of their league games were postponed – as they were successfully defending their African title and because of the Africa Cup of Nations finals in January – Al Ahly put together a record-breaking winning run of 21 league matches from the start of May to make sure of the title with three games to spare.

The astonishing winning sequence beat the previous record of 18 successive victories in a single campaign, which Ahly set under their legendary Portuguese coach Manuel Jose back in 2005.

This time around they had to catch up considerable ground, and ended up playing 26 matches in just four months to complete their programme.

"It has been exhausting, but we managed to navigate through it," said their coach Marcel Koller, a persistent critic of the organisational foibles of the Egyptian Football Association. He used 44 players during his league campaign

Egyptian kings... Al Ahly celebrate another key victory on their march to the title

Top scorer... Al Ahly forward Wessam Abou Ali

in a masterclass of rotation and trying to keep players fit as Ahly finished with 85 points.

In March, they also won the delayed 2023 Egyptian Cup final with a 2-0 success over Zamalek with late goals from Emam Ashour and Mohamed Magdy Afsha in Cairo.

In December, they were also victorious in the new-look Super Cup, in which four teams competed in a mini tournament in Abu Dhabi. Trips to the Gulf States, where there are well over a million Egyptian expatriate workers, are always lucrative money-spinners.

> This was Al Ahly's 44th title, which is now 30 more than their arch-rivals and nearest historical challengers Zamalek

Zamalek won a first African trophy in five years with narrow success in the African Confederation Cup but their domestic campaign proved disappointing and they finished the league campaign in third place, a huge 29 points adrift of the winners.

They didn't help themselves by refusing to turn up to face Ahly in the Cairo Derby in June, protesting against perceived refereeing injustices following a defeat to Al Masry. That stunt saw them deducted three points and handed Ahly a walkover win.

It was a particularly odd decision given that they had already beaten Ahly in the season's first Cairo Derby in April, not long after changing coach. The Colombian Juan Carlos Osorio, formerly national team coach of Mexico and Paraguay, started the season but was sacked in November. His replacement, Jose Gomes, arrived in February and success in the Confederation Cup means the 54-year-old Portuguese will likely stay for the immediate future.

There was also a milestone for 39-year-old midfielder Abdallah El-Said, who moved into third in the Egyptian League's list of all-time top scorers. He is behind Hassan El-Shazli (176 goals) and Hossam Hassan (168), the man who took charge of the national team in February.

Second placed Pyramids also had a mid-season coaching change with Krunoslav Jurcic taking over after Jaime Pacheco had been fired. They put together a 14-match winning run from April before Ahly beat them 3-2 in July. They have been runners-up for three successive seasons as they look to challenge the Al Ahly-Zamalek hegemony. The club were only founded in 2008 and have nothing of the fanbase that passionately follow the Cairo giants, but do have plenty of ambition and decent financial backing.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Mohamed Abdelmonem (Al Ahly)
There was plenty of European club interest in the 25-year-old centre-back after his stellar season at the back for the African champions, and he duly joined Ligue 1 side Nice in August.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Wessam Abou Ali (Al Ahly)
Signed from Swedish club IK Sirius in January, the Danish-born Palestine international forward scored 18 goals in just 19 league matches to finish as the division's top scorer.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Marcel Koller (Al Ahly)
The 63-year-old Swiss coach has been at Al Ahly for two seasons and has pretty much hoovered up every trophy available to him since arriving in Cairo.

Coach of the Season... Marcel Koller

Confederation Cup winners ...Zamalek

Oceania

STEVE MENARY

Oceania nations eye World Cup prize

Expanded finals in 2026 allows the small islands of Oceania to dream big

The World Cup qualifiers in the Oceania region have long been fairly predictable. Dominated by Australia before their move to the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in 2006, New Zealand are now the undisputed top dogs in the region.

With the expansion of the World Cup finals in 2026 to accommodate 48 teams, Oceania now has 1.5 slots instead of 0.5, meaning the runners-up get a second chance via an inter-confederational play-off. That game, whoever it involves, will be very tough. But the opportunity in itself makes the latest qualifiers more interesting than any others in previous editions.

The 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign saw the competing teams – due to COVID – head to Qatar for a one-off tournament, but this time hosting duties will be shared between Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, with each matchday in the two groups played in a different location. The winners and runners-up in both groups will advance to the semi-finals and final to be played next March in New Zealand, which will be a further advantage for the All Whites.

The fixtures start on October 10 with the Solomon Islands playing Fiji and New Caledonia taking on Papua New Guinea in what should be a highly competitive Group A.

Fiji performed strongly in the group stages of the recent Nations Cup, when Rob Sherman's side played – and won – all three group games in the Fijian capital of Suva. With Fiji starting in Suva again and their veteran striker and captain Roy Krishna, now aged 37, aware that this represents his last tilt at playing in a World Cup finals, the Fijians will be favoured to progress.

New Caledonia were forced to withdraw from that competition due to political unrest in the French territory,

Group B rivals... Vanuatu faced New Zealand in the 2024 OFC Nations Cup final
Credit: OFC Media via Phototek

but Johann Sidaner's side should be competitive providing they get to take part this time.

Most of New Caledonia's side play domestically, but striker Lues Waya is playing in the French third tier with USSA Vertou and was among the scorers when New Caledonia took gold in the final of the Pacific Games football tournament last year, edging past the Solomon Islands in the final.

While New Caledonia did not even get the chance to play at the Nations Cup, the Solomon Islands had a tournament to forget, losing both games. Star striker Raphael Le'ai, now in Australia with Adelaide City, will hope the World Cup qualifiers produce an improvement but they will not be helped by the format, which will take them from Fiji for their first game to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, for the final two games.

In contrast, home advantage should aid Felipe Vega-Arango's emerging PNG side (more on page 88) in what is likely to be a pivotal game with Fiji on November 14. If they can get a result, then the Fiji v New Caledonia game on November 17 should decide the group's other qualifier.

Group B looks more predictable with the staging format helping the side that are already highly likely to win.

New Zealand have reached the finals of the World Cup in 1982 and 2010 and look to have a relatively easy ride to the semi-finals, although the All Whites' experiences at the recent Nations Cup will mean that Darren Bazeley's side will not be taking anything for granted.

Vanuatu showed the benefits of home advantage in the recent Nations Cup with the hosts making the final, and they will host both of the group's opening fixtures. Captain and defender Brian Kaltak won the A-League title in Australia with Central Coast Mariners and last season's AFC Cup and will play a pivotal role for Juliano Schmeling's side.

Vanuatu again start at home, against a Samoa side that emerged from a short preliminary round staged in the Samoan capital of Apia in September featuring the four lowest-ranked teams in Oceania. Having seen off American Samoa 2-1, Samoa then prevailed against Tonga – after the Tongans dispatched Cook Islands 3-1 – winning 2-1 after extra-time, but they are likely to struggle against three teams that all have realistic ambitions of either winning the group or making the inter-confederational play-offs.

Fiji legend... Roy Krishna
Credit: OFC Media via Phototek

With the expansion of the World Cup finals in 2026 to accommodate 48 teams, Oceania now has 1.5 slots instead of 0.5, meaning the runners-up get a second chance via an inter-confederational play-off

Vanuatu's second game will take them to Hamilton, New Zealand, to take on a Kiwis side that thrashed them 4-0 in the group stage of the Nations Cup and then 3-0 in the final.

Tahiti also conceded five goals without reply to the All Whites in the Nations Cup – at the semi-final stage – and they will face them again in the first game, but they will at least have the benefit of not having to travel to New Zealand for it.

Group B moves to New Zealand for the second and third matches, with the hosts likely to coast through. The crunch game will be in the final round on November 18, when Tahiti take on Vanuatu.

With goal difference separating teams level on points, it is likely that goals scored against Samoa and conceded against New Zealand could well settle the runners-up spot.

While the one guaranteed OFC place at the 2026 World Cup again looks predictable, the runners-up slot could be more wide open than ever.

New Zealand skipper...Chris Wood is likely to star in the WC qualifiers

THE DRAW

GROUP A

- Solomon Islands
- Fiji
- New Caledonia
- Papua New Guinea

GROUP B

- New Zealand
- Tahiti
- Vanuatu
- Samoa

Papua New Guinea

STEVE MENARY

PNG upheaval after late coaching change

Papua New Guinea appoint Felipe Vega-Arango to replace Warren Moon on the eve of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers

Felipe Vega-Arango has been brought in as the new head coach of Papua New Guinea ahead of the start of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers in Oceania.

The Spaniard takes the job after completing a second spell in charge of the Solomon Islands and after the PNG Football Association's decision to sack Australian manager Warren Moon.

The former Brisbane Roar coach led the *Kapuls* through the 2023 Pacific Games and the OFC Nations Cup earlier this year, but lost his job this summer after declining to relocate from Australia's Gold Coast on a permanent basis.

"The reason behind his termination is we have asked Warren to come and live in Papua New Guinea; to reside in the country," PNGFA president John Kapi Natto told the local *Post Courier*. "We don't want him to stay in Australia and just fly in [to] visit the team, and go back to Australia [and] come back in again. That's not the long term that we want.

"We took this matter to our NEC [national executive committee] members and they said it is not good. If we want a long-term [coach], we should bring someone to reside here in the country."

ABOVE: FIFA World Series ...Papua New Guinea players ahead of March's friendly against Central African Republic

The World Cup qualifiers present a real opportunity for smaller countries in Oceania who have long suffered from New Zealand's dominance, such as Papua New Guinea.

The All Whites are favourites to win and take the one guaranteed spot in the finals, but the runners-up advance to an inter-confederational play-off and a rare opportunity to play outside the Oceania region.

PNG have regularly played in world cup finals in rugby league, but in football their best performance was runners-up in the 2016 OFC Nations Cup, while further back two bronze medals were achieved at the Pacific Games in 1969 and 1987.

Under Moon, PNG did leave the Oceania region to take part in FIFA's new World Series and travelled to Sri Lanka as preparation for this year's Nations Cup.

A goalless draw with the hosts was followed by a 4-0 defeat to the Central African Republic. "It was a great opportunity for our players," Moon told *World Soccer* before his unexpected departure. "We saw it as a success. It's about educating our players. They were magnificent against the CAR, who had a lot of experienced players."

Moon, who left Brisbane Roar in February 2023 after a slide down the A-League table, had less success at the Nations Cup, where his side were beaten 5-1 in their opener by co-hosts Fiji. A subsequent 1-1 draw with Tahiti was a more creditable result and PNG left after a narrow 2-1 win over Samoa ahead of the start of Oceania's World Cup qualifiers this Autumn.

The *Kapuls* are reliant on Tommy Semmy of Australia's Werribbee City up front, but some young players are getting experience overseas. Teenage defenders Raymond Diho and Lennard Atterwell have joined North Geelong Warriors in Australia and Alcochetense in Portugal respectively.

The bulk of the squad are drawn from the local scene, where Hekari – winners of the OFC Champions League in 2010 – remain the team to beat, but it is a complicated picture. The club was controlled by Kapi Natto, who in 2016 led clubs to form a breakaway league after his exclusion from PNGFA elections.

> "The reason behind his termination is we have asked Warren to come and live in Papua New Guinea...we don't want him to stay in Australia and just fly in [to] visit the team"
>
> PNGFA president John Kapi Natto

After winning a subsequent presidential election, his wife Vonnie Kapi Natto took over the club as general manager and the eight-team Premier Soccer League started in 2022 as a replacement for the old National Soccer League.

While the club scene has now been stabilised, changing national team coach on the eve of the start of arguably PNG's most important series of World Cup qualifiers has created more disruption at international level.

PNG star man... Tommy Semmy

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Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

SOUTH AMERICA Section

● *6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Sep 5 – El Alto
Bolivia 4 (R. Vaca 13, Algaranaz 45+5 pen, Terceros 46, Monteiro 89)
Venezuela 0
Bolivia: Lampe – Medina, Haquin, Suarez; H. Cuellar, Matheus (Camacho 85), Chavez (Sagredo 46), Fernandez (Paz 75); H. Vaca (Terceros 34), Alganaraz (Monteiro 75), R. Vaca.
Venezuela: Romo – Murillo (Machis 46), Ferraresi (Makoun 57), Osorio, Aramburu, Navarro; Segovia, Martinez (Soteldo 46), Pereira (Casseres Jr 58); Cadiz (Andrade 66), Rondon.

Sep 5 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 3 (Mac Allister 48, Alvarez 84, Dybala 90+1)
Chile 0
Argentina: E. Martinez – Otamendi, Romero, Li. Martinez (Acuna 79); Molina, De Paul, Mac Allister (Dybala 79), Fernandez, Gonzalez (Lo Celso 51); Alvarez (Castellanos 89), La. Martinez (Garnacho 79).
Chile: Arias – Isla, Catalan, Diaz, Galdames (Mena 72); Osorio, Echeverria (Baeza 72), Nunez (Alarcon 61); Loyola, Vargas (Brereton Diaz 79), Davila (Palacios 61).

Sep 6 – Montevideo
Uruguay 0
Paraguay 0
Uruguay: Rochet – Nandez, Marichal (Bueno 46), Caceres, Olaza (Saracchi 77); Valverde, Ugarte (Martinez 79), B. Rodriguez (Torres 80); Pellistri (Olivera 59), Suarez, M. Araujo.
Paraguay: Fernandez – Velazquez, G. Gomez, Alderete, Alonso; Cubas (Villasanti 56), D. Gomez (Sosa 61); Enciso, Bobadilla (Viera 82), Almiron (Romero 82); Pitta (Arce 61).

Sep 6 – Curitiba
Brazil 1 (Rodrygo 30)
Ecuador 0
Brazil: Alisson – Danilo, Marquinhos, Gabriel, Guilherme Arana (Wendell 74); Andre (Joao Gomes 85), Bruno Guimaraes (Gerson 62); Luiz Henrique (Estevao Willian 62), Paqueta (Lucas Moura 72), Vinicius Junior; Rodrygo.
Ecuador: Galindez – Torres, Pacho, Hincapie; Franco, Caicedo, Mendez (Gruezo 46), Sarmiento (Paez 46), Estupinan (Medina 85); Rodriguez (Mercado 68), Valencia (Yeboah 68).

Sep 6 – Lima
Peru 1 (Callens 68)
Colombia 1 (Diaz 82)
Peru: Gallese – Araujo, Zambrano, Callens (Abram 82); Advincula, Cartagena (Polo 90+4), Tapia, Pena (Archimbaud 82), Lopez; Valera (Ormeno 88), Lapadula (Reyna 81).
Colombia: Vargas – Munoz, Cuesta (Mina 46), Lucumi, Monica; Rios, Lerma, J. Arias (Asprilla 72); Sinisterra (James 46), Cordoba (Duran 72), Diaz.

Sep 10 – Barranquilla
Colombia 2 (Mosquera 25, James 60 pen)
Argentina 1 (Gonzalez 48)
Colombia: Vargas – Munoz, Mosquera (Cabal 88), Lucumi, Monica; Rios, Lerma, J. Arias (Castano 79); James (Portilla 90+3), Duran (Cordoba 79), Diaz.
Argentina: E. Martinez – Montiel (Molina 46), Otamendi, Romero, Li. Martinez (Acuna 64); De Paul (Lo Celso 74), Paredes (Mac Allister 64), Fernandez (Dybala 85), Gonzalez; Alvarez, La. Martinez.

Sep 10 – Santiago
Chile 1 (Vargas 39)
Bolivia 2 (Alganaraz 13, Terceros 45+1)
Chile: Arias – Isla, Catalan, Diaz, Suazo; Osorio (Tapia 61), Pulgar, Davila (Meneses 60); Palacios; Vargas, Brereton Diaz (Pizarro 35).
Bolivia: Lampe (Viscarra 45+1) – Medina, Haquin, Suarez, Sagredo; Matheus (V. Cuellar 90+3), E. Vaca, Villamil; Terceros (Rocha 68), Alganaraz, Fernandez.

Sep 10 – Quito
Ecuador 1 (Valencia 54)
Peru 0
Ecuador: Galindez – Torres, Pacho, Hincapie; Preciado, Franco, Caicedo, Estupinan (Chavez 87); Mercado (Yeboah 59), Valencia (Rodriguez 67), Paez (Vite 58).
Peru: Gallese – Araujo, Santamaria (Zambrano 46), Callens; Advincula (Sonne 46), Cartagena (Archimbaud 46), Tapia, Pena (Quispe 68), Lopez; Valera (Ormeno 79), Lapadula.

Sep 10 – Maturin
Venezuela 0
Uruguay 0
Venezuela: Romo – Aramburu, Osorio, Ferraresi, Navarro; Casseres Jr (Rincon 82); Bello (Machis 59), Martinez, Segovia (Savarino 59), Soteldo; Rondon (Cadiz 90+1).
Uruguay: Rochet – Varela, Bueno, Caceres (Marichal 5), Olaza; Martinez, Ugarte, B. Rodriguez (Torres 54, Fonseca 88); Pellistri (Saracchi 88), Olivera, M. Araujo (Merential 46).

Sep 10 – Asuncion
Paraguay 1 (D. Gomez 20)
Brazil 0
Paraguay: Fernandez – Caceres, Balbuena, Alderete (Velazquez 39), Alonso; Villasanti, Bobadilla; D. Gomez (Sosa 66), Enciso (Riveros 85), Almiron (Cuenca 86); Pitta (Arce 67).
Brazil: Alisson – Danilo, Marquinhos, Gabriel, Guilherme Arana (Estevao Willian 86); Paqueta (Gerson 79), Andre, Bruno Guimaraes (Luiz Henrique 46); Rodrygo (Lucas Moura 79), Endrick (Joao Pedro 46), Vinicius Junior.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Argentina	8	6	0	2	12	4	18
Colombia	8	4	4	0	9	5	16
Uruguay	8	4	3	1	13	5	15
Ecuador*	8	4	2	2	6	4	11
Brazil	8	3	1	4	9	8	10
Venezuela	8	2	4	2	6	7	10
Paraguay	8	2	3	3	2	3	9
Bolivia	8	3	0	5	10	15	9
Chile	8	1	2	5	4	12	5
Peru	8	0	3	5	2	10	3

*Deducted 3 points

Fixtures

Matchday 9
Oct 10-11:
Peru v Uruguay; Venezuela v Argentina; Bolivia v Colombia; Chile v Brazil; Ecuador v Paraguay

Matchday 10
Oct 14-15:
Uruguay v Ecuador; Colombia v Chile; Brazil v Peru; Paraguay v Venezuela; Argentina v Bolivia

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Third Round

Group A

Sep 5 – Fuladshahr
Iran 1 (Taremi 34)
Kyrgyzstan 0

Sep 5 – Al Rayyan
Qatar 1 (Al Hassan 38)
United Arab Emirates 3 (Abdalla 68, Ibrahim 80, Saleh 90+4)

Sep 5 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 1 (Masharipov 20)
North Korea 0

Sep 10 – Al Ain
United Arab Emirates 0
Iran 1 (Ghayedi 45+3)

Sep 10 – Vientiane
North Korea 2 (Ri Il-song 19, Kang Kuk-chol 52)
Qatar 2 (Afif 31 pen, Almoez 44)

Sep 10 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 2 (Kojo 15, Abdurakhmanov 35)
Uzbekistan 3 (Shomurodov 17, Aliqulov 45, Urunov 72)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uzbekistan	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
Iran	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
UAE	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
North Korea	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Qatar	2	0	1	1	3	5	1
Kyrgyzstan	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

Group B

Sep 5 – Seoul
South Korea 0
Palestine 0

Sep 5 – Basra
Iraq 1 (Hussein 13)
Oman 0

Sep 5 – Amman
Jordan 1 (Al Tamari 14)
Kuwait 1 (Nasser 90+2 pen)

Sep 10 – Muscat
Oman 1 (Jung Seung-hyun 45+2 og)
South Korea 3 (Hwang Hee-chan 10, Son Heung-min 82, Joo Min-kyu 90+11)

Sep 10 – Kuala Lumpur
Palestine 1 (W. Ali 41)
Jordan 3 (Al Naimat 5, 50, Al Rawabdeh 72)

Sep 10 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 0
Iraq 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jordan	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
South Korea	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Iraq	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Kuwait	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Palestine	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
Oman	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group C

Sep 5 – Saitama
Japan 7 (Endo 12, Mitoma 45+2, Minamino 52, 58, J. Ito 77, Maeda 87, Kubo 90+5)
China 0

Sep 5 – Gold Coast
Australia 0
Bahrain 1 (Souttar 89 og)

Sep 5 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Juwayr 45+3)
Indonesia 1 (Oratmangoen 19)

Sep 10 – Riffa
Bahrain 0
Japan 5 (Ueda 37 pen, 47, Morita 61, 64, Ogawa 81)

Sep 10 – Dalian
China 1 (Lajami 14 og)
Saudi Arabia 2 (Kadesh 39, 90)

Sep 10 – Jakarta
Indonesia 0
Australia 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan	2	2	0	0	12	0	6
Saudi Arabia	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Bahrain	2	1	0	1	1	5	3
Indonesia	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Australia	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
China	2	0	0	2	1	9	0

Fixtures

Group A
Oct 10: Qatar v Kyrgyzstan; Uzbekistan v Iran; United Arab Emirates v North Korea
Oct 15: Iran v Qatar; Uzbekistan v United Arab Emirates; Kyrgyzstan v North Korea

Group B
Oct 10: Iraq v Palestine; Jordan v South Korea; Oman v Kuwait
Oct 15: South Korea v Iraq; Jordan v Oman; Palestine v Kuwait

Group C
Oct 10: Australia v China; Saudi Arabia v Japan; Bahrain v Indonesia
Oct 15: Japan v Australia; Saudi Arabia v Bahrain; China v Indonesia

OCEANIA Section

● *1 direct slot available, plus 1 play-off slot*

First Round

Matchday 1

Sep 6 – Apia
Cook Islands 1 (Kumsuz 63)
Tonga 3 (Tikoipau 27, Polovili 39 pen, Kefu 79)

Sep 6 – Apia
American Samoa 0
Samoa 2 (Tumua 59 pen, Vaai 90+8)

Matchday 2

Sep 9 – Apia
Tonga 1 (Sonasi 45+1)
Samoa 2 (Salisbury 82, Faamatau 105+3)
After Extra-Time

Second Round Fixtures

Group A
Oct 10: New Caledonia v Papua New Guinea; Solomon Islands v Fiji
Nov 14: Solomon Islands v New Caledonia; Papua New Guinea v Fiji
Nov 17: Fiji v New Caledonia; Papua New Guinea v Solomon Islands

Group B
Oct 11-12:
New Zealand v Tahiti; Vanuatu v Samoa
Nov 15:
Samoa v Tahiti; New Zealand v Vanuatu
Nov 18:
Tahiti v Vanuatu; Samoa v New Zealand

2024-25 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Group A1

Sep 5 – Lisbon
Portugal 2 (Dalot 7, Ronaldo 34)
Croatia 1 (Dalot 41 og)
Portugal: Costa – Dalot, Dias, Inacio (A. Silva 77), Mendes; B. Silva, Vitinha (Pote 90), Fernandes; Neto (Semedo 46), Ronaldo (Jota 88), Leao (J. Neves 46).
Croatia: Livakovic – Sutalo, Pongracic (Caleta-Car 46), Gvardiol; Jakic (Perisic 76), Modric (P. Sucic 77), Kovacic, Baturina (Matanovic 61), Sosa; Mario Pasalic (L. Sucic 67), Kramaric.

Sep 5 – Glasgow
Scotland 2 (Gilmour 46, McTominay 76)
Poland 3 (S. Szymanski 8, Lewandowski 44 pen, Zalewski 90+7 pen)
Scotland: Gunn – Ralston, Hanley, McKenna, Robertson; Gilmour (Morgan 82), McLean (Doak 71); McGinn, McTominay, Christie (Gauld 71); Dykes (Shankland 71).
Poland: Bulka – Bednarek, Dawidowicz, Kiwior (Walukiewicz 46); Frankowski, S. Szymanski (Slisz 82), Zielinski (Moder 82), Urbanski, Zalewski; Piatek (Piotrowski 72), Lewandowski (Buksa 72).

Sep 8 – Osijek
Croatia 1 (Modric 52)
Poland 0
Croatia: Livakovic – Sutalo, Caleta-Car, Gvardiol; Pjaca, P. Sucic (L. Sucic 46), Modric, Kovacic (Mario Pasalic 79), Sosa (Perisic 90+1); Matanovic (Budimir 69), Petkovic (Kramaric 69).
Poland: Skorupski – Kaminski (Frankowski 82), Walukiewicz, Bednarek, Dawidowicz, Zalewski; Bogusz (Swiderski 62), S. Szymanski (Piotrowski 86), Zielinski (Slisz 62), Urbanski (Moder 62); Lewandowski.

Sep 8 – Lisbon
Portugal 2 (Fernandes 54, Ronaldo 88)
Scotland 1 (McTominay 7)
Portugal: Costa – Semedo (Dalot 76), A. Silva, Dias, Mendes; B. Silva (J. Neves 68), Palhinha (R. Neves 46), Fernandes; Neto (Ronaldo 46), Jota, Leao (Felix 68).
Scotland: Gunn – Ralston, Hanley, McKenna, Robertson; Gilmour, McLean (Gauld 74); Christie (Morgan 87), McTominay, McGinn (Doak 90+1); Dykes (Conway 74).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
Croatia	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Poland	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Scotland	2	0	0	2	3	5	0

Group A2

Sep 6 – Debrecen
Belgium 3 (De Bruyne 21, 51 pen, Tielemans 48)
Israel 1 (Castagne 36 og)
Belgium: Casteels – Castagne, Faes, Theate, De Cuyper (Debast 64); Onana, Tielemans (Engels 74); Lukebakio (Bakayoko 82), De Bruyne, Doku (Duranville 74); Openda (De Ketelaere 64).
Israel: Gerafi – Nachmias, Schlomo, Gandelman (Revivo 63); Jehezkel, Lavi, Abu Fani (Jaber 68), Gropper (David 64); Solomon (Biton 80), Gloukh (Peretz 63); Khalaili.

Sep 6 – Paris
France 1 (Barcola 1)
Italy 3 (Dimarco 30, Frattesi 51, Raspadori 74)
France: Maignan – Clauss (Kounde 77), Konate, Saliba, T. Hernandez; Fofana (Kone 58), Kante (Zaire-Emery 77); Olise (Dembele 58), Griezmann (Thuram 77), Barcola; Mbappe.
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Bastoni, Calafiori (Buongiorno 71); Cambiaso, Frattesi (Udogie 62), Ricci, Tonali, Dimarco (Brescianini 81); Pellegrini (Raspadori 46); Retegui (Kean 81).

Sep 9 – Lyon
France 2 (Kolo Muani 29, Dembele 57)
Belgium 0
France: Maignan – Kounde, Upamecano, Saliba, Digne; Kante (Fofana 90+4), Kone, Guendouzi (Griezmann 79); Dembele (Olise 80), Kolo Muani (Mbappe 67), Thuram (Barcola 67).
Belgium: Casteels – Castagne (Meunier 83), Faes, Debast, Theate; Tielemans (Mangala 60), Onana; Lukebakio (Bakayoko 60), De Bruyne, Doku (Duranville 83); Openda (De Ketelaere 69).

Sep 9 – Budapest
Israel 1 (Abu Fani 90)
Italy 2 (Frattesi 38, Kean 62)
Israel: Gerafi – Jehezkel, Nachmias, Shlomo, Revivo; Lavi (Jaber 46), Kanichowsky (Abu Fani 67); Abada (David), Peretz (Safuri 67), Solomon; Khalaili (Gloukh 46).
Italy: Donnarumma – Gatti, Buongiorno, Bastoni; Bellanova (Cambiaso 63), Frattesi, Ricci (Zaccagni 86), Tonali, Dimarco (Udogie 71); Raspadori (Brescianini 63); Kean (Retegui 86).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Italy	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
France	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Belgium	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Israel	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

Group A3

Sep 7 – Dusseldorf
Germany 5 (Fullkrug 27, Musiala 58, Wirtz 66, Pavlovic 77, Havertz 81 pen)
Hungary 0
Germany: Ter Stegen – Kimmich, Tah, Schlotterbeck (Koch 70), Raum (Henrichs 69); Andrich (Stiller 82), Gross (Pavlovic 60); Wirtz, Havertz, Musiala; Fulkrug (Beier 60).
Hungary: Gulasci – Balogh, Orban, Dardai; Nego (Bolla 46), Schafer, A. Nagy (Nikitscher 82), Kerkez (Z. Nagy 67); Szoboszlai, Sallai (Csoboth 75); Varga (Adam 67).

Sep 7 – Eindhoven
Netherlands 5 (Zirkzee 13, Reijnders 45+2, Gakpo 56, Weghorst 88, Simons 90+2)
Bosnia & Herz 2 (Demirovic 27, Dzeko 73)
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Dumfries (Geertruida 67), De Ligt, Van Dijk, Ake (J. Timber 66); Schouten (Q. Timber 83), Reijnders, Gravenberch; Simons, Zirkzee (Weghorst 74), Gakpo.
Bosnia & Herz: Vasilj – Gazibegovic, Barisic, Katic, Mujakic (Burnic 68), Dedic; Huseinbasic (Bajraktarevic 68), Tahirovic (Krunic 46), Gigovic (Saric 69); Dzeko, Demirovic (Tabakovic 83).

Sep 10 – Budapest
Hungary 0
Bosnia & Herzegovina 0
Hungary: Dibusz – Botka (Balogh 83), Orban, Dardai; Bolla (Csoboth 75), Nikitscher, Schafer, Z. Nagy (Kerkez 83); Sallai, Szoboszlai; Varga (Adam 82).
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Vasilj – Gazibegovic, Bicakcic, Katic, Barisic, Dedic; Saric (Gigovic 61), Basic (Huseinbasic 61), Burnic (Tahirovic 46); Demirovic (Bajraktarevic 77), Dzeko.

Sep 10 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 2 (Reijnders 2, Dumfries 50)
Germany 2 (Undav 38, Kimmich 45+3)
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Dumfries, De Ligt (Van Hecke 46), Van Dijk, Ake (J. Timber 45); Schouten (Q. Timber 46), Gravenberch; Simons (Geertruida 74), Reijnders, Gakpo; Brobbey (Weghorst 82).
Germany: Ter Stegen – Kimmich, Tah (Anton 46), Schlotterbeck, Raum; Andrich (Can 64), Gross (Pavlovic 63); Wirtz, Havertz, Musiala (Fuhrich 89); Undav (Beier 63).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Germany	2	1	1	0	7	2	4
Netherlands	2	1	1	0	7	4	4
Bosnia & Herz	2	0	1	1	2	5	1
Hungary	2	0	1	1	0	5	1

Group A4

Sep 5 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Dorgu 82, Hojbjerg 90+2)
Switzerland 0
Denmark: Schmeichel – Andersen, Vestergaard, Nelsson (Dorgu 81); Bah, Hojbjerg, Hjulmand (Norgaard 90+1), Kristiansen; Eriksen (Damsgaard 62), Gronbaek (Skov Olsen 81); Dolberg (Wind 62).
Switzerland: Kobel – Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez; Widmer, Freuler, Xhaka, Aebischer (Amdouni 90+1); Rieder (Zakaria 65), Vargas (Wuthrich 53); Embolo (Duah 90+1).
Sent off: Elvedi 52, Xhaka 87.

Sep 5 – Belgrade
Serbia 0
Spain 0
Serbia: Rajkovic – Erakovic (Simic 46), Milenkovic, Pavolvic; Nedeljkovic, I. Ilic (S. Mitrovic 85), Lukic, Birmancevic; Samardzic (Ratkov 74), Zivkovic (Belic 62); Jovic (Grujic 74).
Spain: Raya – Carvajal, Le Normand, Laporte, Cucurella (Grimaldo 56); Zubimendi, Fabian (Pedri 76); Yamal, Olmo (Joselu 82), Williams (F. Torres 82); Ayoze (Oyarzabal 57).

Sep 8 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Gronbaek 36, Poulsen 61)
Serbia 0
Denmark: Schmeichel – Kristensen (Frendrup 82), Vestergaard, Andersen; Bah, Hojbjerg, Norgaard (Hjulmand 60), Kristiansen; Gronbaek (Isaksen 60), Eriksen (Dorgu 68); Poulsen (Wind 69).
Serbia: Rajkovic – Erakovic, Milenkovic, Pavlovic; Nedeljkovic (S. Mitrovic 64), I. Ilic, Grujic (Zivkovic 46), Lukic (Belic 72), Birmancevic (D. Jovanovic 80); Samardzic (Ratkov 64); Jovic.

Sep 8 – Geneva
Switzerland 1 (Amdouni 41)
Spain 4 (Joselu 4, Fabian 13,77, F. Torres 80)
Switzerland: Kobel – Wuthrich, Akanji, Rodriguez (Rieder 62); Omeragic, Freuler, Zakaria (Sierro 62), Aebischer (Monteiro 76); Amdouni, Embolo (Duah 76), Vargas (Steffen 85).
Spain: Raya – Carvajal, Le Normand, Laporte, Grimaldo; Pedri (Vivian 28), Rodri (Zubimendi 59), Fabian (Garcia 81); Yamal (F. Torres 46), Joselu, Williams (Yeremy 59).
Sent off: Le Normand 20.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Denmark	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Spain	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Serbia	2	0	1	1	0	2	1
Switzerland	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

Group B1

Sep 7 – Tbilisi
Georgia 4 (Kvaratskhelia 33 pen, Chakvetadze 53, Mikautadze 63, Kochorashvili 66)
Czech Republic 1 (Kalvach 80)
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Gvelesiani (Goglichidze 88), Kashia, Dvali; Kakabadze (Gocholeishvili 75), Chakvetadze (Davitashvili 75), Kochorashvili, Kiteishvili (Nonikashvili 75), Lochoshvili; Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 75), Kvaratskhelia.
Czech Republic: Kovar – Zima, Hranac, Krejci; Coufal, Soucek, Kral (Kalvach 46), Rynes (Zeleny 26); Provod (Sulc 76), Cvancara (Lingr 46); Schick (Hlozek 68).

Sep 7 – Prague
Ukraine 1 (Konoplya 49)
Albania 2 (Ismajli 54, Asani 66)
Ukraine: Trubin – Konoplya, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Brazhko (Malinovskyi 81); Tsyhankov (Zinchenko 81), Sudakov (Yarmolenko 72), Shaparenko (Vanat 73), Kabaiev (Pikhalyonok 72); Yaremchuk.
Albania: Strakosha – Hysaj, Ismajli, Kumbulla, Mitaj; Ramadani, Asllani; Asani, Laci (Berisha 73), Bajrami (Hoxha 77); Manaj.

Sep 10 – Tirana
Albania 0
Georgia 1 (Kochorashvili 71)
Albania: Strakosha – Hysaj, Ismaji, Kumbulla, Mitaj; Ramadani, Asllani; Asani (Spahiu 73), Bajrami (Uzuni 81), Hoxha (Laci 61); Manaj (Seferi 72).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Gvelesiani, Kashia, Dvali; Kakabadze, Kochorashvili (Altunashvili 90+3), Chakvetadze, Kiteishvili, Lochoshvili; Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 86), Kvaratskhelia (Davitashvili 75).

Sep 10 – Prague
Czech Rep 3 (Sulc 21, 45+2, Soucek 80 pen)
Ukraine 2 (Vanat 37, Sudakov 84)
Czech Republic: Kovar – Coufal, Vitik, Krejci, Zeleny; Sulc (Kusej 81), Soucek, Cerv (Kral 89); Cerny (Hlozek 66), Chory (Schick 81), Provod (Lingr 65).
Ukraine: Trubin – Tymchyk, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Stepanenko (Malinovskyi 79); Yarmolenko (Tsyhankov 69), Shaparenko (Sudakov 69), Zinchenko (Pikhalyonok 85), Mudryk; Vanat (Yaremchuk 79).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Georgia	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Albania	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Czech Republic	2	1	0	1	4	6	3
Ukraine	2	0	0	2	3	5	0

Group B2

Sep 7 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0
England 2 (Rice 11, Grealish 26)
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Coleman (O'Brien 57), Collins, O'Shea; Doherty (Knight 58), Molumby, Smallbone (Browne 75), Brady (Ferguson 82); Ogbene, Szmodics; Idah (McAteer 75).
England: Pickford – Alexander-Arnold, Guehi, Maguire (Stones 85), Colwill; Mainoo (Gomes 77), Rice, Grealish (Gibbs-White 77); Saka, Kane (Bowen 84), Gordon (Eze 77).

Sep 7 – Piraeus
Greece 3 (Ionnidis 23 76, Kallman 37 og)
Finland 0
Greece: Vlachodimos – Rota, Mavropanos, Koulierakis, Tsimikas; Mantalos (Siopis 65), Bouchalakis (Zafeiris 65); Chatzigiouvanis (Konstantelias 46), Bakasetas (Pavlidis 77), Pelkas; Ioannidis (Vagiannidis 77).
Finland: Hradecky – Stahl, Hoskonen, Ivanov, Galvez; Peltola, Schuller (Nissila 45); Lod (Jensen 62), Kamara (Walta 82), Antman (Keskinen 62); Kallman (Pohjanpalo 62).

Sep 10 – Wembley
England 2 (Kane 57, 76)
Finland 0
England: Pickford – Alexander-Arnold, Konsa (Colwill 61), Stones (Guehi 80), Lewis; Rice, Gomes; Saka (Madueke 66), Grealish, Gordon (Eze 66); Kane (Bowen 80).
Finland: Hradecky – Stahl, Hoskonen, Ivanov, Uronen (Niskanen 46); Peltola, Schuller (Walta 84), Kamara; Jensen (Lod 63), Pukki (Kallman 46), Keskinen (Antman 74).

Sep 10 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0
Greece 2 (Ioannidis 50, Tzolis 87)
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Omobamidele (Doherty 74), Collins, O'Shea, Brady; Ogbene (Robinson 84), Browne, Smallbone, Molumby (Ferguson 64), Knight (McAteer 74); Szmodics (Idah 84).
Greece: Vlachodimos – Rota, Mavropanos, Koulierakis, Tsimikas; Bouchalakis (Pelkas 68), Siopis (Ntoi 88); Chatzigiovanis (Zafeiris 67), Bakasetas, Tzolis (Vagiannidis 89); Ioannidis (Pavlidis 88).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Greece	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
England	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Rep. of Ireland	2	0	0	2	0	4	0
Finland	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group B3

Sep 6 – Almaty
Kazakhstan 0
Norway 0
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Bystrov, Kasym, Marochkin, Alip, Vorogovskiy; Orazov (Abiken 58), Tagybergen, Zaynutdinov (Karimov 63), Chesnokov (Astanov 80); Amybetov (Samorodov 59).
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ostigard, Hanche-Olsen, Moller Wolfe; Odegaard, Berg (Berge 70), Myhre (Strand Larsen 70); Sorloth (Donnum 70), Haaland, Nusa (Egeli 84).

Sep 6 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Sesko 16 pen)
Austria 1 (Laimer 28)
Slovenia: Vidosek – Brekalo (Balkovec 86), Drkusic, Bijol, Janza; Stojanovic, Cerin, Elsnik, Lovric (Celar 63); Sesko, Sporar (Mlakar 63).
Austria: Pentz – Mwene, Posch, Wober, Prass; Laimer, Seiwald; Schmid (Stoger 82), Sabitzer, Wimmer (Baumgartner 46); Arnautovic (Adamu 82).

Sep 9 – Oslo
Norway 2 (Myhre 9, Haaland 80)
Austria 1 (Sabitzer 37)
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Hanche-Olsen (Gundersen 28), Ostigard, Moller Wolfe; Odegaard (Thorsvedt 67), Berge, Berg (Thorsby 46), Myhre (Nusa 46); Haaland, Sorloth (Langas 90+7).
Austria: Pentz – Mwene (Querfeld 57), Posch, Lienhart, Prass; Sabitzer, Seiwald; Schmid (Arnautovic 78), Wimmer (Stoger 78); Laimer, Baumgartner (Seidl 68).

Sep 9 – Maribor
Slovenia 3 (Sesko 23, 28, 63)
Kazakhstan 0
Slovenia: Oblak – Brekalo (Kurtic 87), Drkusic, Bijol, Janza; Stojanovic (Ilicic 78), Cerin, Elsnik, Mlakar (Stankovic 65); Sesko (Balkovec 87), Celar (Vipotnik 65).
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Bystrov (Skvortsov 76), Maliy (Kasym 46), Marochkin, Alip, Vorogovskiy; Orazov (Astanov 57), Tagybergen, Zaynutdinov, Samorodov (Chesnokov 46); Aymbetov (Zhaksylykov 76).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slovenia	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Norway	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Austria	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Kazakhstan	2	0	1	1	0	3	1

Group B4

Sep 6 – Reykjavik
Iceland 2 (Oskarsson 39, Thorsteinsson 58)
Montenegro 0
Iceland: Valdirmarsson – Sampsted, Hermansson, Gretarsson, Tomasson; Gudmundsson, Thordharson; Anderson (Willumsson 77), G. Sigurdsson (Gudjohnsen 65), Thorsteinsson (A. Sigurdsson 65); Oskarsson (Johannesson 88).
Montenegro: Mijatovic – M. Vukcevic (Camaj 60), Tuci, Rubezic, Radunovic; Brnovic; Marusic, Erakovic, Jovovic, Osmajic (Jovetic 60); Krstovic (Mugosa 78).

Sep 6 – Cardiff
Wales 0
Turkey 0
Wales: Ward – Roberts, Rodon, B. Davies, Williams; Wilson, Ampadu, J. James

(Cooper 88); Johnson, Ramsey (Moore 72), Thomas (Koumas 72).
Turkey: Gunok – Celik, Ayhan, Soyuncu, Bardakci, Muldur; Guler (Kahveci 90), Kokcu (Calhanoglu 64), Yuksek (Yokuslu 77), Yildiz (Akturkoglu 77); Yilmaz.
Sent off: Yimaz 62.

Sep 9 – Niksic
Montenegro 1 (Camaj 73)
Wales 2 (Moore 1, Wilson 3)
Montenegro: Mijatovic – Marusic (M. Vukcevic 74), Rubezic, Sipcic, A. Vukcevic (Radunovic 77); Brnovic (Osmajic 69), Jovovic; Camaj, Jovetic (Erakovic 74), Krstovic; Mugosa (Bakic 70).
Wales: Darlow – Roberts (Johnson 43), Mepham, Rodon, B. Davies; Williams, Ampadu, Cooper (James 61), Koumas (Thomas 46); Wilson (Ramsey 80); Moore (Harris 80).

Sep 9 – Izmir
Turkey 3 (Akturoglu 2, 52, 88)
Iceland 1 (Palsson 37)
Turkey: Gunok – Muldur (Celik 74), Demiral, Bardakci, Elmali; Calhanoglu (Kokcu 46), Yuksek (Ayhan 87); Guler, Kahveci (Yildiz 74), Akturkoglu; Nayir (Yokuslu 81).
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Palsson (Lunddal Fridriksson 59), Hermannsson, Gretarsson, Finnsson; Anderson (Willumsson 46), Gudmundsson, Thordharson, Thorsteinsson (Traustason 59); G. Sigurdsson (Oskarsson 59); Gudjohnsen.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkey	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Wales	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Iceland	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Montenegro	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group C1

Sep 5 – Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Dadashov 82)
Sweden 3 (Isak 65, 71, Gyokeres 80 pen)
Azerbaijan: Dzhenetov – A. Huseynov (Seydiyev 84), Mustafazda, B. Huseynov, Cafarguliyev; Diniyev (Kokcu 75), Isayev (Camalov 83); Sheydayev (Akhundzade 83), Mahmudov (Nuriyev 69), Bayramov; Dadashov.
Sweden: Johansson – Wahlqvist (Cajuste 72), Douglas (Bergvall 72), Hien, Augustinsson; Kulusevski, Ayari (Starfelt 72), Svanberg (Saletros 64), Elanga (Sema 46); Gyokeres, Isak.

Sep 5 – Tallinn
Estonia 0
Slovakia 1 (Suslov 70)
Estonia: Hein – Lilander, J. Tamm, Mets, Schjonning-Larsen; Miller (Yakovlev 78); Ainsalu (Palumets 69), Shein, Sinyavskiy (Saarma 84); Sappinen, A. Tamm (Vetkal 69).
Slovakia: Dubravka – Pekarik (Gyomber 90+2), Skriniar, Obert (Vavro 65), Hancko; Duda (Rigo 83), Lobotka, Benes (Bero 83); Suslov, Bozenik (Strelec 65), Haraslin.

Sep 8 – Kosice
Slovakia 2 (Duda 22 pen, Strelec 26)
Azerbaijan 0
Slovakia: Dubravka – Gyomber, Skriniar, Obert, Hancko (Kozlovsky 90+3); Kucka, Lobotka, Duda (Benes 71); Suslov (Duris 71), Strelec (Bozenik 84), Haraslin (Tupta 84).
Azerbaijan: Dzhenetov – Seydiyev (A. Huseynov 37), Mammadov B. Huseynov (Aliyev 70), Cafarguliyev; Camalov, Isayev; Camalov (Diniyev 78), Isaev; Kokcu (Nuriyev 46), Mustafaev (Sheydayev 46), Bayramov; Dadashov.

Sep 8 – Stockholm
Sweden 3 (Gyokeres 30, 44, Isak 40)
Estonia 0
Sweden: Johansson – Douglas, Hien, Gudmundsson; Eliasson, Ayari (Nanasi 63), Saletros (Bergvall 84), Sema (Cajuste 63); Kulusevski; Gyokeres (Elanga 79), Isak (Nilsson 79).
Estonia: Hein – Paskotsi, J. Tamm, Mets, Schjonning-Larsen (Pikk 59); Miller (Lilander 83); Palumets, Shein (Poom 59), Sinyavskiy (Kristal 72); Vetkal; Sappinen (A. Tamm 60).
Sent off: Palumets 62.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sweden	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Slovakia	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Azerbaijan	2	0	0	2	1	5	0
Estonia	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group C2

Sep 6 – Pristhtina
Kosovo 0
Romania 3 (Man 40, R. Marin 51 pen, Dragus 82)
Kosovo: Muric – Vojvoda, A. Rrahmani, Aliti, Paqarada (Rrudhani 81); Zhegrova (Sahiti 81), Rexhbecaj, Berisha (Muslija 67), Rashica; Muriqi (R. Rrahmani 66), Asllani (Krasniqi 66).
Sent off: Vojvoda 85.
Romania: Nita – Ratiu, Dragusin, Burca, Bancu; R. Marin, M. Marin, Stanciu (Mitrita 86); Man (Coman 78), Dragus (Puscas 83), Mihaila (Hagi 83).

Sep 6 – Marijampole
Lithuania 0
Cyprus 1 (Pittas 34)
Lithuania: Gertmonas – Sirvys (G. Paulauskas 70), Kazukolovas, Girdvainis, Tutyskinas, Lasickas; Slivka, Vorobjovas (Verbickas 86), Matulevicius (Kalinauskas 61); Kucys, Dolznikov (V. Paulauskas).
Cyprus: Mall – Karo, Gogic, Kyprianou (Malekkides 46); Panagioutou (Andreou 46), Splojaric (Chrysostomou 65), Artymatas, Ioannou; Kastanos, Tzionis (Correria 89); Pittas (Laifis 90+3)

Sep 9 – Larnaca
Cyprus 0
Kosovo 4 (Muqiri 9 pen, 21, A. Rrahmani 48, Dellova 55)
Cyprus: Mall – Karo, Gogic, Kyprianou (Laifis 46); Panagioutou (Andreou 46), Artymatas, Kastanos, Ioannou (Splojaric 71); Tzionis (Loizou 65), Pittas, Malekkides (Correirra 58).
Kosovo: Bekaj – Hadergjonaj, A. Rrahmani, Aliti (Dellova 46), Rrudhani; Rexhbecaj, Emerllahu (Bujupi 87), Berisha; Krasniqi, Muriqi (Al.Rrahmani 46), Rashica (Sahiti 70).

Sep 9 – Bucharest
Romania 3 (Mihaila 4, R. Marin 87 pen, Mitrita 90+2)
Lithuania 1 (Kucys 34)
Romania: Tarnovanu – Ratiu, Dragusin, Burca, Bancu; Stanciu, M. Marin (Olaru 56), Mihaila (Mitrita 70); Man (Hagi 70), Dragus (Alibec 88), R. Marin.
Lithuania: Gertmonas – Sirvys Lekiatas, Girdvainis, Tutyskinas, Lasickas (Kazukolovas 90+1); Dolznikov (Kalinauskas 76), Vorobjovas (Antanavicius 75), Matulevicius (Verbickas 66), Slivka; Kucys (G. Paulauskas 65).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Romania	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Kosovo	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Cyprus	2	1	0	1	1	4	3
Lithuania	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group C3

Sep 5 – Zalaegerszeg
Belarus 0
Bulgaria 0
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Volkov, Kovalev (Karpovich 64), Martynovich, Zabelin; Pechenin; Yablonskiy (Selyava 77), Kaplenko, Ebong, (Klimovich 83); Shikavka (Melnichenko 83), Antilevskiy (Kireev 64).
Bulgaria: Mitov – Popov, Atanasov, Petkov, Nurnberger; Antov (M. Minchev 77), Gruev; Despodov (Ivanov 83), Krastev, Kirilov (I. Minchev 77); Kolev (Ahmedov 83).
Sent off: Krastev 73.

Sep 5 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 2 (McNair 11, Ballard 16)
Luxembourg 0
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – Ballard (Smyth 83), McNair, Brown; Bradley, S. Charles (McCann 83), Saville, Hume; Price (McCausland 74), D. Charles (Magennis 46), Marshall (Lewis 57).
Luxembourg: Moris – Jans (Dzogovic 74), Mahmutovic (Pinto 46), Gerson, Carlson; Bohnert, Martins, Barrerio, Veiga (Andrade Brites 74); Olesen (S. Thill 85), Rodrigues (Muratovic 85).

Sep 8 – Luxembourg
Luxembourg 0
Belarus 1 (Gromyko 76)
Luxembourg: Moris – Dzogovic (Rupil 84), Chanot, Carlson, Jans (Pinto 46); Sinani, Olesen (S. Thill 46), Martins, Barreiro, Bohnert (Mahmutovic 65); Muratovic.
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Volkov, Martynovich, Zabelin; Karpovich (Kovalev 67), Selyava (Yablonskiy 46), Ebong, Pechenin; Bakhar (Kireev 42), Shikavka (Barkovskiy 85), Antilevskiy (Gromyko 67).

Sep 8 – Plovdiv
Bulgaria 1 (Despodov 40)
Northern Ireland 0
Bulgaria: Mitov – Popov, Atanasov, Petkov, Nurnberger; Kostadinov (Petrov 78), Gruev; Despodov (Ivanov 78), M. Minchev (Panayotov 72), Kirilov (Dimitrov 72); Kolev (Ahmedov 63).
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – Ballard, McNair (Marshall 73), Brown; Hume (McCausland 83), S. Charles, Saville (Smyth 73), Lewis; Bradley, D. Charles (Lavery 59), Price (McCann 82).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Belarus	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Bulgaria	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
N. Ireland	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Luxembourg	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group C4

Sep 7 – Torshavn
Faroe Islands 1 (Davidsen 9 pen)
North Macedonia 1 (Bardhi 49 pen)
Faroe Islands: a Reynatrodh – Danielsen, Chukwudi (Askham 46), Edmundsson, Davidsen; G. Vatnhamar; Joensen (Mikkelsen 66), S. Vatnhamar (Knudsen 84), Sorensen, M. Olsen (Johannesen 84); Edmundsson (Justinussen 66).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Iljazovski (Alioski 46), Serafimov, Musliu; Mitrovski (Qamili 46), Bardhi, Alimi, Dimoski; Miovski, Elmas, Churlinov (Ilievski 77).

Sep 7 – Yerevan
Armenia 4 (Bichakhchyan 6, Dubra 35 og, Zelarayan 48, Spertsyan 86)
Latvia 1 (Harutyunyan 9 og)
Armenia: Cancarevic – Calisir (Muradyan 76), Haroyan, G. Harutyunyan; Hovhannisyan, Spertsyan, Iwu, Tiknizyan; Bichakhchyan (Sevikyan 66), Zelarayan (Ranos 84), Serobyan (Shaghoyan 66).
Latvia: Matrevics – Jurkovskis, Dubra (Balodis 63), Tobers; Jaunzems (Savalnieks 64), Saveljevs, Vapne (Zelenkovs 63), Ciganiks; Uldrikis, Ikaunieks (Varslavans 82), Daskevics (Gutkovskis 63).

Sep 10 – Riga
Latvia 1 (Varslavans 64)
Faroe Islands 0
Latvia: Matrevics – Jurkovskis, Tobers, Balodis; Savalnieks, Zelenkovs (Vapne 80), Saveljevs, Ciganiks; Gutkovskis (Uldrikis 72), Varslavans (Melniks 80), Ikaunieks (Jaunzems 90+2).
Faroe Islands: a Reynatrodh – Danielsen (Knudsen 83), Chukwudi, Edmundsson, Davidsen; Joensen (K.Olsen 83), S.Vatnhamar (Justinussen 46), G. Vatnhamar, Sorensen, M. Olsen (Petersen 83); Edmundsson (Mikkelsen 46).

Sep 10 – Skopje
North Macedonia 2 (Bardhi 70, Miovski 78)
Armenia 0
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Ashkovski (Manev 83), Zajkov, Musliu, Dimoski; Babunski (Serafimov 46), Alimi (Atanasov 59); Churlinov (Qamili 4, Kostadinov 59), Bardhi, Elmas; Miovski.
Sent off: Zajkov 45+4.
Armenia: Cancarevic – Calisir (Manvelyan 86), Haroyan, G. Harutyunyan; Hovhannisyan, Iwu, Spertsyan, Tiknizyan (Grigoryan 66); Sevikyan (Bichakhchyan 66), Zelarayan (H. Harutyunyan 74), Ranos (Serobyan 46).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
N. Macedonia	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Armenia	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Latvia	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Faroe Islands	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Group D1

Sep 5 – Serravalle
San Marino 1 (Sensoli 53)
Liechtenstein 0
San Marino: Colombo – G. Benvenuti, Cevoli, Rossi, Tosi (T. Benvenuti 71); A. Golinucci (Battistini 62), Capicchioni (Mularoni 81), Casadei; Contadini, Nanni (Giacopetti 71), Sensoli (Zannoni 62).
Liechtenstein: Buchel – N. Beck (Martin Marxer 62), Wieser, Goppel (Oberwaditzer 62); S. Wolfinger, Hasler, Sele (Luchinger 63), Buchel, Zund (Meier 63); Notaro (J.Beck 81), Saglam.

Sep 8 – Europa Point
Gibraltar 2 (Walker 8, Scanlon 90+7)
Liechtenstein 2 (Saglam 53, Hasler 90+14 pen)
Gibraltar: Banda – Jolley (Valarino 73), Lopes, Annesley, Olivero; Scanlon, Torrilla, Bent, Britto; Walker (Casciaro 90+10); De Barr (Bartolo 57).
Liechtenstein: Buchel – N. Beck, Wieser, Goppel (Martin Marxer 87); Meier (Luchinger 90+1), Hasler, Buchel (Wolfinger 87), Sele, Kindle (Marco Marxer 75); Notaro (Netzer 75), Saglam.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
San Marino	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Gibraltar	1	0	1	0	2	2	1
Liechtenstein	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

Group D2

Sep 7 – Chisinau
Moldova 2 (Caimacov 32, Nicolaescu 45+4 pen)
Malta 0
Moldova: Celeadnic – Platica, Craciun, Mudrac, Marandici, Reabciuk; Caimacov (Cojocaru 85), Motpan (Bogaciuc 70), Rata, Ionita (Stina 75); Nicolaescu (Damascan 70).
Malta: Bonello – Z. Muscat, Shaw, Borg; J. Mbong, Yankam (Lonardelli 46), Guillaumier (N. Muscat 85), Camenzuli; Pisani (Teuma 71); Reid (Montebello 46), P. Mbong (Nwoko 70).

Sep 10 – Andorra la Vella
Andorra 0
Malta 1 (Camenzuli 45)
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra (Cucu 64), Llovera, M. Vales, Olivera, San Nicolas (Izquierdo 81); Rubio (Alaez 64), Guillen (Teixeira 35), E. Vales (C. Garcia 81), Cervos; Rosas.
Malta: Bonello – Z. Muscat, Shaw, Borg; Lonardelli, J. Mbong, Guillaumier, Camenzuli; Nwoko (P. Mbong 78), Teuma (Yankam 90+4), Montebello (Reid 60).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Moldova	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Malta	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Andorra	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Fixtures

Group A1
Oct 12: Croatia v Scotland; Poland v Portugal
Oct 15: Poland v Croatia; Scotland v Portugal

Group A2
Oct 10: Israel v France; Italy v Belgium
Oct 14: Belgium v France; Italy v Israel

Group A3
Oct 11: Bosnia & Herzegovina v Germany; Hungary v Netherlands
Oct 14: Bosnia & Herzegovina v Hungary; Germany v Netherlands

Group A4
Oct 12: Serbia v Switzerland; Spain v Denmark
Oct 15: Spain v Serbia; Switzerland v Denmark

Group B1
Oct 11:
Czech Republic v Albania; Ukraine v Georgia
Oct 14:
Georgia v Albania; Ukraine v Czech Republic

Group B2
Oct 10: England v Greece; Finland v Rep of Ireland
Oct 13: Finland v England; Greece v Rep of Ireland

Group B3
Oct 10: Austria v Kazakhstan; Norway v Slovenia
Oct 13: Kazakhstan v Slovenia; Austria v Norway

Group B4
Oct 11: Iceland v Wales; Turkey v Montenegro
Oct 14: Iceland v Turkey; Wales v Montenegro

Group C1
Oct 11: Estonia v Azerbaijan; Slovakia v Sweden
Oct 14: Azerbaijan v Slovakia; Estonia v Sweden

Group C2
Oct 12: Lithuania v Kosovo; Cyprus v Romania
Oct 15: Kosovo v Cyprus; Lithuania v Romania

Group C3
Oct 12: Bulgaria v Luxembourg; Belarus v Northern Ireland
Oct 15: Belarus v Luxembourg; Northern Ireland v Bulgaria

Group C4
Oct 10: Faroe Islands v Armenia; Latvia v North Macedonia
Oct 13: Armenia v North Macedonia; Faroe Islands v Latvia

Group D1
Oct 10: Gibraltar v San Marino
Oct 13: Liechtenstein v Gibraltar

Group D2
Oct 10: Moldova v Andorra
Oct 13: Malta v Moldova

2024-25 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

Group A1

Sep 5 – San Jose
Costa Rica 3 (Calvo 50, Lassiter 77, Madrigal 80)
Guadeloupe 0

Sep 5 – Leonora
Guyana 1 (Glasgow 43 pen)
Suriname 3 (Van der Kust 18, Montnor 66, Misidjan 83)

Sep 5 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 3 (Rubin 3, Pinto 61 pen, Martinez 90+5)
Martinique 1 (Appin 51)

Sep 9 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 0
Costa Rica 0

Sep 9 – Le Gosier
Guadeloupe 1 (Leborgne 67)
Suriname 0

Sep 9 – Fort-de-France
Martinique 2 (Labeau 45+2, Varane 86)
Guyana 2 (Jones 14, 24)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Costa Rica	2	1	1	0	3	0	4
Guatemala	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Suriname	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Guadeloupe	2	1	0	1	1	3	3
Guayana	2	0	1	1	3	5	1
Martinique	2	0	1	1	3	5	1

Group A2

Sep 6 – Kingston
Jamaica 0
Cuba 0

Sep 6 – Remire-Montjoly
French Guiana 0
Nicaragua 1 (Talavera 90+5)

Sep 6 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 4 (A. Lopez 39, Arriaga 45+2, Rodriguez 54, Ruiz 86)
Trinidad & Tobago 0

Sep 10 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 1 (Ruiz 50)
Jamaica 2 (Maldonado 49 og, Antonio 76 pen)

Sep 10 – Santiago de Cuba
Cuba 1 (Espino 42 pen)
Nicaragua 1 (Medina 90+7)

Sep 10 – Bacolet
Trinidad & Tobago 0
French Guiana 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jamaica	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Nicaragua	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Honduras	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Cuba	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
French Guiana	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Trinidad & Tob	2	0	1	1	0	4	1

Group B1

Sep 5 – Bonaire
Montserrat 1 (Barzey 28)
El Salvador 4 (Landaverde 9, Mauricio 63, Benitez 68, Santamaria 84 pen)

Sep 5 – Bonaire
Bonaire 1 (Hoeve 36)
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Pierre 39)

Sep 8 – Bonaire
El Salvador 2 (Hoeve 45+3 og, Mauricio 60)
Bonaire 1 (Van der Sande 90+1)

Sep 8 – Bonaire
St Vincent & Grenadines 2 (Stewart 15, Spring 88)
Montserrat 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
El Salvador	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
St Vincent & Gren	2	1	1	1	3	1	4
Bonaire	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Montserrat	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

Group B2

Sep 6 – St George's
St Lucia 2 (Jude-Boyd 24, Elva 55)
Curacao 1 (Brenet 63)

Sep 6 – St George's
Saint Martin 0
Grenada 2 (Akins 5, Charles-Cook 38)

Sep 9 – St George's
Curacao 4 (J. Bacuna 10, Kastaneer 13, L. Bacuna 48, Zimmerman 65)
Saint Martin 0

Sep 9 – St George's
Grenada 1 (Akins 51)
St Lucia 2 (Forino-Joseph 13, Baptiste 21)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Lucia	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
Curacao	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Grenada	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Saint Martin	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

Group B3

Sep 6 – Puerto Rico
Puerto Rico 1 (Diaz 29)
Haiti 4 (Jean Jacques 51, Pierrot 60, Louicius 76, Nazon 83)

Sep 6 – Puerto Rico
Sint Maarten 2 (Lake 81, Olivacce 90+3)
Aruba 0

Sep 9 – Puerto Rico
Haiti 6 (Christopher 40, Nazon 59, 75, 82, Cantave 77, 85)
Sint Maarten 0

Sep 9 – Puerto Rico
Aruba 0
Puerto Rico 1 (Antonetti 73)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Haiti	2	2	0	0	10	1	6
Puerto Rico	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Sint Maarten	2	1	0	1	2	6	3
Aruba	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group B4

Sep 7 – Piggotts
Bermuda 2 (Crichlow 17, Lambe 51)
Dominican Republic 3 (Romero 35, Morschel 62, Vasquez 84)

Sep 7 – Piggotts
Dominica 2 (Bertrand 46, Joseph 57)
Antigua & Barbuda 1 (Stevens 53)

Sep 10 – Piggotts
Dominican Republic 2 (Vasquez 11, Romero 25)
Dominica 0

Sep 10 – Piggotts
Antigua & Barbuda 0
Bermuda 1 (Crichlow 56)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dominican Rep	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Bermuda	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Dominica	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Antigua & B.	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group C1

Sep 4 – Upper Bethlehem
US Virgin Islands 3 (Henry 27, Joseph 77, Catone-Highfield 86)
Bahamas 3 (St Fleur 2 pen, Julmis 37, Adderley 58)

Sep 7 – Upper Bethlehem
Bahamas 2 (Adderley 42, 66)
Barbados 3 (Applewhite 10, Taylor 80, An. Applewhaite 82)

Sep 10 – Upper Bethlehem
Barbados 3 (Hinkson 15, Reid-Stephen 86, 90+3)
US Virgin Islands 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Barbados	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
Bahamas	2	0	1	1	5	6	1
US Virgin Is.	2	0	1	1	3	6	1

Group C2

Sep 4 – Providenciales
Anguilla 2 (Hughes 57, Carpenter 74)
Turks & Caicos 0

Sep 7 – Providenciales
Turks & Caicos 0
Belize 4 (Velasquez 12, Polanco 43, 73, Palacio 66)

Sep 10 – Providenciales
Belize 1 (Polanco 27)
Anguilla 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Belize	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Anguilla	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Turks & Caicos	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

Group C3

Sep 4 – George Town
British Virgin Islands 0
Cayman Islands 1 (Seymour 84)

Sep 7 – George Town
Cayman Islands 1 (Duval 51)
St Kitts & Nevis 4 (Rogers 10, Williams 19, 37, Stephen 72)

Sep 10 – George Town
St Kitts & Nevis 2 (Williams 11, 64)
British Virgin Islands 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Kitts & Nevis	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Cayman Islands	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
British Virgin Is.	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Fixtures

Group A1
Oct 11:
Suriname v Costa Rica; Guadeloupe v Martinique; Guyana v Guatemala
Oct 15: Costa Rica v Guatemala; Martinique v Guadeloupe; Suriname v Guyana

Group A2
Oct 10: Nicaragua v Jamaica; Cuba v Trinidad & Tobago; French Guiana v Honduras
Oct 14: Jamaica v Honduras; Trinidad & Tobago v Cuba; Nicaragua v French Guiana

Group B1
Oct 10: St Vincent & Grenadines v El Salvador; Bonaire v Montserrat
Oct 13: El Salvador v St Vincent & Grenadines; Montserrat v Bonaire

Group B2
Oct 11:
Grenada v Curacao; Saint Martin v St Lucia
Oct 14:
Curacao v Grenada; St Lucia v Saint Martin

Group B3
Oct 11: Aruba v Haiti; Sint Maarten v Puerto Rico
Oct 14: Haiti v Aruba; Puerto Rico v Sint Maarten

Group B4
Oct 12: Antigua & Barbuda v Dominican Republic; Dominica v Bermuda
Oct 15: Dominican Republic v Antigua & Barbuda; Bermuda v Dominica

Group C1
Oct 9: Bahamas v US Virgin Islands
Oct 12: US Virgin Islands v Barbados
Oct 15: Barbados v Bahamas

Group C2
Oct 9: Turks & Caicos v Anguilla
Oct 12: Anguilla v Belize
Oct 15: Belize v Turks & Caicos

Group C3
Oct 9: Cayman Islands v British Virgin Islands
Oct 12: British Virgin Islands v St Kitts & Nevis
Oct 15: St Kitts & Nevis v Cayman Islands

ASIAN CUP 2027 QUALIFYING

Play-Off Round – 1st Leg

Sep 5 – Colombo
Sri Lanka 0
Cambodia 0

Sep 5 – Gianyar
Timor-Leste 4 (Joao Pedro 3, 27, 52, Zenivio 58)
Mongolia 1 (Oyunbaataryn 34)

Sep 5 – Bandar Seri Begawan
Brunei 3 (Hakeme 32, Nazry 56, Hariz 61)
Macau 0

Play-Off Round – 2nd Leg

Sep 10 – Phnom Penh
Cambodia 2 (Nhean 58, Sos 98)
Sri Lanka 2 (Kelaart 37, Kammerknecht 120+2)
After Extra-time. 2-2 on aggregate
Sri Lanka win 4-2 on pens

Sep 10 – Ulaanbaatar
Mongolia 2 (Torbat 8, Dolgoon 54)
Timor-Leste 0
Timor-Leste win 4-3 on aggregate

Sep 10 – Taipa
Macau 0
Brunei 1 (Azwan 10)
Brunei win 4-0 on aggregate

● *Play-off winners Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Brunei advance to the third round group stage, with the draw to be held on December 19, 2024. The 21 others teams in the pot for the third round are: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong, India, Laos, Lebanon, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Syria, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, Yemen*

● *The teams already qualified for the 2027 Asian Cup are: Saudi Arabia (hosts), Australia, Bahrain, China, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, North Korea, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, South Korea, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan*

AFCON 2025 QUALIFYING

Group A

Sep 4 – El Jadida
Comoros 1 (M'Changama 37)
Gambia 1 (Barrow 45+1)

Sep 5 – Tunis
Tunisia 1 (Sassi 90+8)
Madagascar 0

Sep 8 – El Jadida
Gambia 1 (Sowe 14)
Tunisia 2 (Abdi 11, Ben Romdhane 75)

Sep 9 – Tunis
Madagascar 1 (Andriamatsinoro 9)
Comoros 1 (M'Changama 41)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Comoros	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Gambia	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Madagascar	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Group B

Sep 5 – El Jadida
Central African Republic 3 (Mafouta 1, 24, Koyalipou 62)
Lesotho 1 (Sera 56)

Sep 6 – Agadir
Morocco 4 (Ziyech 10 pen, 26 pen, Brahim 59, El Kaabi 82)
Gabon 1 (Aubameyang 40 pen)

Sep 9 – Agadir
Lesotho 0
Morocco 1 (Brahim 90+3)

Sep 10 – Franceville
Gabon 2 (Aubameyang 11 pen, Babicka 40)
Central African Republic 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
C. African Rep	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Gabon	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Lesotho	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group C

Sep 6 – Cairo
Egypt 3 (Rabia 23, Marmoush 45+1, Adel 70)
Cape Verde 0

Sep 7 – Nouakchott
Mauritania 1 (Amar 84)
Botswana 0

Sep 10 – Francistown
Botswana 0
Egypt 4 (Trezeguet 5, 29, Salah 56, M. Fathi 90+4)

Sep 10 – Praia
Cape Verde 2 (Mendes 28 pen, 75)
Mauritania 0

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	2	2	0	0	7	0	6
Cape Verde	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Mauritania	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Botswana	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group D

Sep 4 – Tripoli
Libya 1 (Al Dawi 16)
Rwanda 1 (Nshuti 47)

Sep 7 – Uyo
Nigeria 3 (Lookman 45+2, 83, Osimhen 78)
Benin 0

Sep 10 – Kigali
Rwanda 0
Nigeria 0

Sep 10 – Abidjan
Benin 2 (Mounie 50, Olaitan 62)
Libya 1 (Al Badri 9 pen)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nigeria	2	1	1	0	3	0	4
Benin	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Rwanda	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Libya	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

Group E

Sep 5 – Oran
Algeria 2 (Aouar 69, Gouiri 90+5)
Equatorial Guinea 0

Sep 6 – Lome
Togo 1 (Denkey 78)
Liberia 1 (Gibson 90+2)

Sep 9 – Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 2 (Nlavo 17, Buyla 75)
Togo 2 (Aholou 45, Laba 90)

Sep 10 – Monrovia
Liberia 0
Algeria 3 (Gouiri 17, Zorgane 25, Bounedjah 80)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Togo	2	0	2	0	3	3	2
Eq. Guinea	2	0	1	1	2	4	1
Liberia	2	0	1	1	1	4	1

Group F

Sep 4 – Juba
Sudan 1 (Eisa 51)
Niger 0

Sep 5 – Kumasi
Ghana 0
Angola 1 (Felicio Milson 90+3)

Sep 9 – Talatona
Angola 2 (Mabululu 51 pen, Nteka 81)
Sudan 1 (Karshoum 55)

Sep 9 – Berkane
Niger 1 (Sako 81)
Ghana 1 (Seidu 44)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Angola	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Sudan	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Ghana	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Niger	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Group G

Sep 6 – Bouake
Ivory Coast 2 (Krasso 73, 84)
Zambia 0

Sep 6 – Monrovia
Sierra Leone 0
Chad 0

Sep 9 – Yaounde
Chad 0
Ivory Coast 2 (Krasso 45+3, Diakite 55)

Sep 10 – Ndola
Zambia 3 (Musonda 28, Kampamba 70, Kangwa 85)
Sierra Leone 2 (Kargbo 33, Mustapha 73)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Zambia	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Sierra Leone	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Chad	2	0	1	1	0	2	1

Group H

Sep 4 – Dar es Salaam
Tanzania 0
Ethiopia 0

Sep 6 – Kinshasa
DR Congo 1 (Kayembe 27)
Guinea 0

Sep 9 – Dar es Salaam
Ethiopia 0
DR Congo 2 (Bongonda 62, Mayele 76)

Sep 10 – Yamoussoukro
Guinea 1 (Bayo 57)
Tanzania 2 (Salum 61, Yahya 88)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
DR Congo	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Tanzania	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Ethiopia	2	0	1	1	0	2	1
Guinea	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group I

Sep 5 – Bissau
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Bura 14)
Eswatini 0

Sep 6 – Bamako
Mali 1 (Bissouma 52)
Mozambique 1 (Catamo 37)

Sep 10 – Mbombela
Eswatini 0
Mali 1 (Bissouma 7)

Sep 10 – Maputo
Mozambique 2 (Guima 5, Elias 73)
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Balde 24)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mozambique	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Mali	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Guinea-Bissau	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Eswatini	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

Group J

Sep 6 – Kampala
Kenya 0
Zimbabwe 0

Sep 7 – Douala
Cameroon 1 (Aboubakar 65)
Namibia 0

Sep 10 – Kampala
Zimbabwe 0
Cameroon 0

Sep 10 – Johannesburg
Namibia 1 (Hotto 90)
Kenya 2 (Avire 58, Abuya 76)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kenya	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Cameroon	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Zimbabwe	2	0	2	0	0	0	2
Namibia	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group K

Sep 5 – Brazzaville
Congo 1 (Massanga 12)
South Sudan 0

Sep 6 – Pretoria
South Africa 2 (Foster 14, Mbatha 90+5)
Uganda 2 (Omedi 51, Mato 53)

Sep 8 – Kampala
Uganda 2 (Kayondo 21, Ssemugabi 85)
Congo 0

Sep 10 – Juba
South Sudan 2 (Okello 15 pen, Yuel 57)
South Africa 3 (Appollis 17, 45+2, Mbatha 90+5)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uganda	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
South Africa	2	1	1	0	5	4	4
Congo	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
South Sudan	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

Group L

Sep 5 – Lilongwe
Malawi 2 (Kawonga 31, L. Nkhoma 75)
Burundi 3 (Idana 22 og, Girumugisha 33, Eldhino 87)

Sep 6 – Dakar
Senegal 1 (Mane 16)
Burkina Faso 1 (Bouda 90+5)

Sep 9 – Lilongwe
Burundi 0
Senegal 1 (Sarr 71 pen)

Sep 10 – Bamako
Burkina Faso 3 (Traore 35, 38, Bande 60 pen)
Malawi 1 (Z. Nkhoma 80)

Current Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Burkina Faso	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Senegal	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Burundi	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Malawi	2	0	0	2	3	6	0

Fixtures

Group A
Oct 6:
Madagascar v Gambia;
Tunisia v Comoros
Oct 14:
Gambia v Madagascar;
Comoros v Tunisia

Group B
Oct 6:
Gabon v Lesotho;
Morocco v Central African Republic
Oct 14:
Lesotho v Gabon;
Central African Republic v Morocco

Group C
Oct 6:
Cape Verde v Botswana;
Egypt v Mauritania
Oct 14:
Botswana v Cape Verde;
Mauritania v Egypt

Group D
Oct 6:
Benin v Rwanda;
Nigeria v Libya
Oct 14:
Rwanda v Benin;
Libya v Nigeria

Group E
Oct 6:
Equatorial Guinea v Liberia;
Algeria v Togo
Oct 14:
Liberia v Equatorial Guinea;
Togo v Algeria

Group F
Oct 6:
Angola v Niger;
Ghana v Sudan
Oct 14:
Niger v Angola;
Sudan v Ghana

Group G
Oct 6:
Zambia v Chad;
Ivory Coast v Sierra Leone
Oct 14:
Chad v Zambia;
Sierra Leone v Ivory Coast

Group H
Oct 6:
Guinea v Ethiopia;
DR Congo v Tanzania
Oct 14:
Ethiopia v Guinea;
Tanzania v DR Congo

Group I
Oct 6:
Mozambique v Eswatini;
Mali v Guinea-Bissau
Oct 14:
Eswatini v Mozambique;
Guinea-Bissau v Mali

Group J
Oct 6:
Namibia v Zimbabwe;
Cameroon v Kenya
Oct 14:
Zimbabwe v Namibia;
Kenya v Cameroon

Group K
Oct 6:
Uganda v South Sudan;
South Africa v Congo
Oct 14:
South Sudan v Uganda;
Congo v South Africa

Group L
Oct 6:
Burkina Faso v Burundi;
Senegal v Malawi
Oct 14:
Burundi v Burkina Faso;
Malawi v Senegal

2024 MERDEKA TOURNAMENT

Semi-Finals

Sep 4 – Kuala Lumpur
Lebanon 1 (Ayoub 13)
Tajikistan 0

Sep 4 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 2 (Syamer 43, Safawi 73 pen)
Philippines 1 (J. Tabinas 27)

Third Place Play-Off

Sep 8 – Kuala Lumpur
Tajikistan 0
Philippines 0
Tajikistan win 4-3 on pens

Final

Sep 8 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 1 (Morales 33)
Lebanon 0

FRIENDLIES

Sep 1 – Fort Lauderdale
Uruguay 1 (Pino 21)
Guatemala 1 (Altan 67)

Sep 2 – Suva
Fiji 1 (Waranaivalu 81 pen)
Solomon Islands 0

Sep 4 – Europa Point
Gibraltar 1 (Bent 18)
Andorra 0

Sep 5 – Hanoi
Vietnam 0
Russia 3 (Kuzyaev 24, Vu Van Thanh 61 og, Musaev 77)

Sep 5 – Suva
Solomon Islands 0
Hong Kong 3 (Juninho 22, Orr 45+1 pen, Wai 47 pen)

Sep 5 – Thimpu
Bhutan 0
Bangladesh 1 (Morsalin 5)

Sep 7 – Kansas City
United States 1 (De la Torre 66)
Canada 2 (Shaffelburg 17, David 58)

Sep 7 – Pasadena
Mexico 3 (Pineda 5, Huerta 53, Romo 57)
New Zealand 0

Sep 8 – Thimpu
Bhutan 1 (Wangchuk 90+1)
Bangladesh 0

Sep 8 – Lautoka
Fiji 1 (Radrigai 18)
Hong Kong 1 (Orr 77)

Sep 10 – Chisinau
Moldova 1 (Rata 10)
San Marino 0

Sep 10 – Hanoi
Vietnam 1 (Nguyen Tien Linh 21)
Thailand 2 (Suphanat 26, Gustavsson 40)

Sep 10 – Arlington
Mexico 0
Canada 0

Sep 11 – Cincinnati
United States 1 (Pulisic 69)
New Zealand 1 (Waine 89)

Club Football

EUROPE

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Third Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Aug 6-7: Qarabag (Aze) 1-2 Ludogorets (Bul); Sparta Prague (Cze) 1-1 FCSB (Rou); Malmo (Swe) 2-2 PAOK (Gre); Midtjylland (Den) 2-0 Ferencvaros (Hun); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 2-0 APOEL (Cyp); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 0-1 Bodo/Glimt (Nor)
Aug 13: Ludogorets (Bul) 2-7 Qarabag (Aze) (agg 4-8, *AET*); FCSB (Rou) 2-3 Sparta Prague (Cze) (agg 3-4); PAOK (Gre) 3-4 Malmo (Swe) (agg 5-6, *AET*); Ferencvaros (Hun) 1-1 Midtjylland (Den) (agg 1-3); APOEL (Cyp) 0-0 Slovan Bratislava (Svk) (agg 0-2); Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 4-1 Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) (agg 5-1)

Third Qualifying Round – League Path

Aug 6-7: Lille (Fra) 2-1 Fenerbahce (Tur); Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 1-1 Rangers (Sco); Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 2-1 Twente (Ned); Slavia Prague (Cze) 3-1 Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel)
Aug 13: Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0-1 Slavia Prague (Cze) (agg 1-4); Fenerbahce (Tur) 1-1 Lille (Fra) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Rangers (Sco) 0-2 Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) (agg 1-3); Twente (Ned) 3-3 Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) (agg 4-5)

Play-Off Round – Champions Path

Aug 20-21: Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 3-0 Qarabag (Aze); Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2-1 Red Star Belgrade (Srb); Young Boys (Sui) 3-2 Galatasaray (Tur); Midtjylland (Den) 1-1 Slovan Bratislava (Svk); Malmo (Swe) 0-2 Sparta Prague (Cze)
Aug 27-28: Galatasaray (Tur) 0-1 Young Boys (Sui) (agg 2-4); Sparta Prague (Cze) 2-0 Malmo (Swe) (agg 4-0); Qarabag (Aze) 0-2 Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) (agg 0-5); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 3-2 Midtjylland (Den) (agg 4-3); Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 2-0 Bodo/Glimt (Nor) (agg 3-2)

Play-Off Round – League Path

Aug 20-21: Lille (Fra) 2-0 Slavia Prague (Cze); Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 0-2 Red Bull Salzburg (Aut)
Aug 27-28: Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1-1 Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) (agg 3-1); Slavia Prague (Cze) 2-1 Lille (Fra) (agg 2-3)

2024-25 EUROPA LEAGUE

Third Qualifying Round – Main Path

Aug 8: Partizan Belgrade (Srb) 0-1 Lugano (Sui); Molde (Nor) 3-0 Cercle Brugge (Bel); Trabzonspor (Tur) 0-1 Rapid Vienna (Aut); Panathinaikos (Gre) 0-1 Ajax (Ned); Braga (Por) 0-0 Servette (Sui); Rijeka (Cro) 1-1 Elfsborg (Swe); Kryvbas Kryvyi Rih (Ukr) 1-2 Viktoria Plzen (Cze)
Aug 15: Lugano (Sui) 2-2 Partizan Belgrade (Srb) (agg 3-2, *AET*); Cercle Brugge (Bel) 1-0 Molde (Nor) (agg 1-3); Ajax (Ned) 0-1 Panathinaikos (Gre) (agg 1-1, *AET, Ajax win 13-12 on pens*); Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2-0 Trabzonspor (Tur) (agg 3-0); Servette (Sui) 1-2 Braga (Por) (agg 1-2); Elfsborg (Swe) 2-0 Rijeka (Cro) (agg 3-1); Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1-0 Kryvbas Kryvyi Rih (Ukr) (agg 3-1)

Third Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Aug 6-8: Panevezys (Ltu) 1-2 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr); Petrocub Hincesti (Mda) 1-0 The New Saints (Wal); Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 2-0 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib); KI (Fro) 2-1 Borac Banja Luka (Bih); UE Santa Colomba (And) 0-2 RFS (Lva); Celje (Svn) 1-0 Shamrock Rovers (Irl)
Aug 15: The New Saints (Wal) 0-0 Petrocub Hincesti (Mda) (agg 0-1); RFS (Lva) 7-0 UE Santa Colomba (And) (agg 9-0); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 3-1 KI (Fro) (agg 4-3, *AET*); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 3-1 Celje (Svn) (agg 3-2, *AET*); Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 3-0 Panevezys (Ltu) (agg 5-1); Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 2-1 Dinamo Minsk (Blr) (agg 2-3)

Play-Off Round

Aug 22: Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 0-1 Anderlecht (Bel); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 1-4 Ajax (Ned); Ludogorets (Bul) 4-0 Petrocub Hincesti (Mda); Lugano (Sui) 3-3 Besiktas (Tur); LASK (Aut) 1-1 FCSB (Rou); RFS (Lva) 2-1 APOEL (Cyp); Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 3-0 TSC (Srb); PAOK (Gre) 4-0 Shamrock Rovers (Irl); Ferencvaros (Hun) 0-0 Borac Banja Luka (Bih); Molde (Nor) 0-1 Elfsborg (Swe); Braga (Por) 2-1 Rapid Vienna (Aut); Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1-0 Hearts (Sco)
Aug 29: Anderlecht (Bel) 1-0 Dinamo Minsk (Blr) (agg 2-0); Ajax (Ned) 3-0 Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) (agg 7-1); Petrocub Hincesti (Mda) 1-2 Ludogorets (Bul) (agg 1-6); Besiktas (Tur) 5-1 Lugano (Sui) (agg 8-4); FCSB (Rou) 1-0 LASK (Aut) (agg 2-1); APOEL (Cyp) 2-1 RFS (Lva) (agg 3-3, *AET, RFS win 4-2 on pens*); TSC (Srb) 1-5 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) (agg 1-8); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 0-2 PAOK (Gre) (agg 0-6); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 1-1 Ferencvaros (Hun) (agg 1-1, *AET, Ferencvaros win 3-2 on pens*); Elfsborg (Swe) 0-1 Molde (Nor) (agg 1-1, *AET, Elfsborg win 4-2 on pens*); Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2-2 Braga (Por) (agg 3-4); Hearts (Sco) 0-1 Viktoria Plzen (Cze) (agg 0-2)

2024-25 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Third Qualifying Round – Main Path

Aug 8: Mlada Boleslav (Cze) 1-1 Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr); Kilmarnock (Sco) 2-2 Tromso (Nor); Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 0-1 Puskas Akademia (Hun); Zurich (Sui) 0-3 Vitoria Guimaraes (Por); Paks (Hun) 3-0 Mornar Bar (Mne); BK Hacken (Swe) 6-1 Paide Linnameeskond (Est); Maribor (Svn) 2-1 Vojvodina (Srb); Spartak Trnava (Svk) 3-1 Wisla Krakow (Pol); St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) 1-0 Sabah (Aze); St Mirren (Sco) 1-1 Brann (Nor); CSKA 1948 (Bul) 2-1 Pafos (Cyp); Ilves (Fin) 1-1 Djurgarden (Swe); Corvinul Hunedoara (Rou) 1-2 Astana (Kaz); Ruzomberok (Svk) 0-0 Hajduk Split (Cro); Noah (Arm) 3-1 AEK Athens (Gre); Auda (Lva) 1-0 Drita (Kos); Iberia 1999 (Geo) 0-1 Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur); Brondby (Den) 2-3 Legia Warsaw (Pol); Maccabi Petah Tikva (Isr) 0-1 CFR Cluj (Rou); Silkeborg (Den) 2-2 Gent (Bel); Osijek (Cro) 1-1 Zira (Aze); St Gallen (Sui) 2-0 Slask Wroclaw (Pol); Botev Plovdiv (Bul) 2-1 Zrinjski Mostar (Bih); Omonia (Cyp) 1-0 Fehervar (Hun); Copenhagen (Den) 1-0 Banik Ostrava (Cze); Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 3-0 Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda)
Aug 15: Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 2-4 Mlada Boleslav (Cze) (agg 3-5); Tromso (Nor) 0-1 Kilmarnock (Sco) (agg 2-3); Puskas Akademia (Hun) 3-3 Ararat-Armenia (Arm) (agg 4-3); Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) 2-0 Zurich (Sui) (agg 5-0); Mornar Bar (Mne) 2-2 Paks (Hun) (agg 2-5); Paide Linnameeskond (Est) 1-1 BK Hacken (Swe) (agg 2-7); Vojvodina (Srb) 1-0 Maribor (Svn) (agg 2-2, *AET, Maribor win 4-2 on pens*); Wisla Krakow (Pol) 3-1 Spartak Trnava (Svk) (agg 4-4, *AET, Wisla Krakow win 12-11 on pens*); Sabah (Aze) 0-1 St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) (agg 0-2); Brann (Nor) 3-1 St Mirren (Sco) (agg 4-2); Pafos (Cyp) 4-0 CSKA 1948 (Bul) (agg 5-2, *AET*); Djurgarden (Swe) 3-1 Ilves (Fin) (agg 4-2); Astana (Kaz) 6-1 Corvinul Hunedoara (Rou) (agg 8-2); Hajduk Split (Cro) 0-1 Ruzomberok (Svk) (agg 0-1); AEK Athens (Gre) 1-0 Noah (Arm) (agg 2-3); Drita (Kos) 3-1 Auda (Lva) (agg 3-2, *AET*); Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 2-0 Iberia 1999 (Geo) (agg 3-0); Legia Warsaw (Pol) 1-1 Brondby (Den) (agg 4-3); CFR Cluj (Rou) 1-0 Maccabi Petah Tikva (Isr) (agg 2-0); Gent (Bel) 3-2 Silkeborg (Den) (agg 5-4, *AET*); Zira (Aze) 2-2 Osijek (Cro) (agg 3-3, *AET, Zira win 2-1 on pens*); Slask Wroclaw (Pol) 3-2 St Gallen (Sui) (agg 3-4); Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 2-0 Botev Plovdiv (Bul) (agg 3-2); Fehervar (Hun) 0-2 Omonia (Cyp) (agg 0-3); Banik Ostrava (Cze) 1-0 Copenhagen (Den) (agg 1-1, *AET, Copenhagen win 2-1 on pens*); Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 0-1 Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) (agg 0-4)

Third Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Aug 8: Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 1-1 Flora (Est); Ordabasy (Kaz) 0-1 Pyunik (Arm); Ballkani (Kos) 0-1 Larne (Nir); HJK (Fin) 1-0 FK Decic (Mne)
Aug 15: Flora (Est) 1-2 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) (agg 2-3); Pyunik (Arm) 1-0 Ordabasy (Kaz) (agg 2-0); Larne (Nir) 0-1 Ballkani (Kos) (agg 1-1, *AET, Larne win 4-1 on pens*); FK Decic (Mne) 2-1 HJK (Fin) (agg 2-2, *AET, HJK win 4-3 on pens*)

Play-Off Round – Main Path

Aug 22: Omonia (Cyp) 6-0 Zira (Aze); St Gallen (Sui) 0-0 Trabzonspor (Tur); Lens (Fra) 2-1 Panathinaikos (Gre); BK Hacken (Swe) 1-2 Heidenheim (Ger); Copenhagen (Den) 2-0 Kilmarnock (Sco); Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) 3-0 Zrinjski Mostar (Bih); Brann (Nor) 2-0 Astana (Kaz); Legia Warsaw (Pol) 2-0 Drita (Kos); Rijeka (Cro) 1-1 Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn); Fiorentina (Ita) 3-3 Puskas Akademia (Hun); Djurgarden (Swe) 1-0 Maribor (Svn); Wisla Krakow (Pol) 1-6 Cercle Brugge (Bel); Mlada Boleslav (Cze) 2-2 Paks (Hun); St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) 0-0 Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur); Chelsea (Eng) 2-0 Servette (Sui); CFR Cluj (Rou) 1-0 Pafos (Cyp); Partizan Belgrade (Srb) 0-1 Gent (Bel); Kryvbas Kryvyi Rih (Ukr) 0-2 Real Betis (Spa); Noah (Arm) 3-0 Ruzomberok (Svk)
Aug 29: Zira (Aze) 1-0 Omonia (Cyp) (agg 1-6); Trabzonspor (Tur) 1-1 St Gallen (Sui) (agg 1-1, *AET, St Gallen win 5-4 on pens*); Panathinaikos (Gre) 2-0 Lens (Fra) (agg 3-2); Heidenheim (Ger) 3-2 BK Hacken (Swe) (agg 5-3); Kilmarnock (Sco) 1-1 Copenhagen (Den) (agg 1-3); Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0-4 Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) (agg 0-7); Astana (Kaz) 3-0 Brann (Nor) (agg 3-2); Drita (Kos) 0-1 Legia Warsaw (Pol) (agg 0-3); Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 5-0 Rijeka (Cro) (agg 6-1); Puskas Akademia (Hun) 1-1 Fiorentina (Ita) (agg 4-4, *AET, Fiorentina win 5-4 on pens*); Maribor (Svn) 0-1 Djurgarden (Swe) (agg 0-2); Cercle Brugge (Bel) 1-4 Wisla Krakow (Pol) (agg 7-5); Paks (Hun) 0-3 Mlada Boleslav (Cze) (agg 2-5); Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 2-0 St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) (agg 2-0); Servette (Sui) 2-1 Chelsea (Eng) (agg 2-3); Pafos (Cyp) 3-0 CFR Cluj (Rou) (agg 3-1); Gent (Bel) 1-0 Partizan Belgrade (Srb) (agg 2-0); Real Betis (Spa) 3-0 Kryvbas Kryvyi Rih (Ukr) (agg 5-0); Ruzomberok (Svk) 3-1 Noah (Arm) (agg 3-4)

Play-Off Round – Champions Path

Aug 22: Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 2-1 Larne (Nir); Pyunik (Arm) 1-0 Celje (Svn); Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 5-0 UE Santa Colomba (And); Panevezys (Ltu) 0-3 The New Saints (Wal); KI (Fro) 2-2 HJK (Fin)
Aug 29: Larne (Nir) 3-1 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) (agg 4-3); Celje (Svn) 4-1 Pyunik (Arm) (agg 4-2); UE Santa Colomba (And) 0-0 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) (agg 0-5); The New Saints (Wal) 0-0 Panevezys (Ltu) (agg 3-0); HJK (Fin) 2-1 KI (Fro) (agg 4-3)

2024 UEFA SUPER CUP

Aug 14 – Warsaw
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Valverde 59, Mbappe 68)
Atalanta (Ita) 0

2024 FA COMMUNITY SHIELD

Aug 10 – Wembley
Manchester United 1 (B. Silva 89)
Manchester City 1 (Garnacho 82)
Manchester City win 7-6 on pens

2024 GERMAN SUPER CUP

Aug 17 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen 2 (Boniface 11, Schick 88)
Stuttgart 2 (Millot 15, Undav 63)
Bayer Leverkusen win 4-3 on pens

2024 PORTUGUESE SUPER CUP

Aug 3 – Aveiro
Sporting 3 (Inacio 6, Goncalves 9, Quenda 24)
Porto 4 (Galeno 28, 66, Gonzalez 64, Jaime 101)
After Extra-Time

2024 DUTCH SUPER CUP

Aug 4 – Eindhoven
PSV 4 (Lang 9, De Jong 48, 80 pen, Til 65)
Feyenoord 4 (Gimenez 29 pen, 54 pen, Nieuwkoop 33, Milambo 72)
Feyenoord win 4-2 on pens

SOUTH AMERICA

2024 COPA LIBERTADORES

Round of 16 – 1st Leg

Aug 13 – Buenos Aires
San Lorenzo (Arg) 1 (Cuello 17)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Paulinho 58)

Aug 13 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Pizarro 76)
Junior (Col) 0

Aug 13 – Curitiba
Gremio (Bra) 2 (Reinaldo 74 pen, 77)
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Lima 58)

Aug 14 – Cordoba
Talleres (Arg) 0
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Diaz 86)

Aug 14 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 4 (Fernandez 9, Silvera 16, Baez 36, Batista 72)
The Strongest (Bol) 0

Aug 14 – Rio de Janeiro
Botafogo (Bra) 2 (Luiz Henrique 22, Igor Jesus 39)
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Mauricio 33)

Aug 15 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 0
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0

Aug 15 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Luiz Araujo 29, Leo Pereira 89)
Bolivar (Bol) 0

Round of 16 – 2nd Leg

Aug 20 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Battaglia 65)
San Lorenzo (Arg) 0
Atletico Mineiro win 2-1 on aggregate

Aug 20 – Barranquilla
Junior (Col) 1 (Bacca 45+1)
Colo-Colo (Chi) 2 (Cepeda 43, Falcon 74)
Colo-Colo win 3-1 on aggregate

Aug 20 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Thiago Silva 14, Arias 28 pen)
Gremio (Bra) 1 (Gustavo Nunes 76)
3-3 on aggregate. Fluminense win 4-2 on pens

Aug 21 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 2 (Borja 34, Simon 50)
Talleres (Arg) 1 (Girotti 69)
River Plate win 3-1 on aggregate

Aug 21 – La Paz
The Strongest (Bol) 1 (Triverio 44 pen)
Penarol (Uru) 0
Penarol win 4-1 on aggregate

Aug 21 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Lopez 86, Rony 90)
Botafogo (Bra) 2 (Igor Jesus 56, Savarino 64)
Botafogo win 4-3 on aggregate

Aug 22 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Bobadilla 31, Calleri 47)
Nacional (Uru) 0
Sao Paulo win 2-0 on aggregate

Aug 22 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Bruno Savio 57)
Flamengo (Bra) 0
Flamengo win 2-1 on aggregate

2024 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Round of 16 – 1st Leg

Aug 13 – Vina del Mar
Huachipato (Chi) 0
Racing (Arg) 2 (A. Martinez 32, Quintero 89 pen)

Aug 13 – Ribeirao Preto
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 1 (Helinho 56)
Corinthians (Bra) 2 (Giovane 6, Talles Magno 14)

Aug 14 – Rosario
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Sandez 6)
Fortaleza (Bra) 1 (Marinho 2)

Aug 14 – Quito
LDU (Ecu) 1 (Arce 14)
Lanus (Arg) 2 (Perez 23, Moreno 45+1)

Aug 14 – Santiago
Palestino (Chi) 2 (Roman 48, Linares 50)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 2 (Varela 41, 90+3)

Aug 15 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 1 (Espinoza 58)
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 1 (Samudio 23)

Aug 15 – Curitiba
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 2 (Erick 41, Christian 62)
Belgrano (Arg) 1 (Jara 1)

Aug 15 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Cavani 65)
Cruzeiro (Bra) 0

Round of 16 – 2nd Leg

Aug 20 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 6 (B. Rodriguez 10, A. Martinez 26, Carbonero 31, 45+3, Di Cesare 51, Almendra 55)
Huachipato (Chi) 1 (Palmezano 48 pen)
Racing win 8-2 on aggregate

Aug 20 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Garro 24)
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 2 (Eduardo Sasha 72, Luan Candido 76)
3-3 on aggregate. Corinthians win 5-4 on pens

Aug 21 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 3 (Lucero 53, Yago Pikachu 78, Lucas Sasha 90+2)
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Mallo 48)
Fortaleza win 4-2 on aggregate

Aug 21 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 3 (Bou 9, Izquierdoz 78, Acosta 89)
LDU (Ecu) 1 (Arce 37)
Lanus win 5-2 on aggregate

Aug 21 – Pereira
Independiente Medellin (Col) 4 (Roman 29 og, Alvarado 42, L. Chaverra 66 pen, Perlaza 67)
Palestino (Chi) 0
Independiente Medellin win 6-2 on aggregate

Aug 22 – Asuncion
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 0
Libertad (Par) 0
1-1 on aggregate. Libertad win 4-3 on pens

Aug 22 – Cordoba
Belgrano (Arg) 0
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 2 (Mastriani 54, Di Yorio 89)
Athletico Paranaense win 4-1 on aggregate

Aug 22 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 2 (Matheus Henrique 9, Walace 21)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Gimenez 48)
2-2 on aggregate. Cruzeiro win 5-4 on pens

AFRICA

2024-25 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

First Qualifying Round

Aug 16-18: Arta Solar (Dji) 0-2 Dekedaha (Som); Mbabane Swallows (Esw) 1-0 Ferroviario da Beira (Moz); Milo (Gui) 0-0 FC Nouadhibou (Mta); SC Villa (Uga) 1-2 CBE (Eth); Vital'O (Bdi) 0-4 Young Africans (Tan); Ngezi Platinum (Zim) 0-0 Maniema Union (Cod); African Stars (Nam) 1-0 Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot); Saint Louis Suns United (Sey) 0-1 Sagrada Esperanca (Ang); Douanes (Bfa) 0-0 Coton (Ben); AS GNN (Nig) 1-2 Raja Casablanca (Mar); Red Star de Bangui (Cta) 0-0 Djoliba (Mal); Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) 1-1 Teungueth (Sen); Bo Rangers (Sle) 1-1 San Pedro (Civ); Al Nasr (Lby) 0-0 Al Merrikh (Sud); Al Merreikh Bentiu (Ssd) 1-0 Gor Mahia (Ken); Azam (Tan) 1-0 APR (Rwa); JKU (Zan) 0-6 Pyramids (Egy); Nyasa Big Bullets (Mwi) 2-1 Red Arrows (Zam); Disciples (Mad) 0-0 Orlando Pirates (RSA); US Zilimadjou (Com) 0-1 Enugu Rangers (Nga); Leopards (Cgo) 0-2 Belouizdad (Alg); Victoria United (Cmr) 0-1 Samartex (Gha); AS PSI (Cha) 0-1 US Monastir (Tun); Watanga (Lbr) 0-2 MC Alger (Alg); Deportivo Mongomo (Eqg) 2-2 ASKO Kara (Tog); Al Ahly Benghazi (Lby) 0-1 Al Hilal (Sud); Remo Stars (Nga) 2-1 AS FAR (Mar)
Aug 23-25: Dekedaha (Som) 3-4 Arta Solar (Dji) (agg 5-4); Pyramids (Egy) 3-1 JKU (Zan) (agg 9-1); Orlando Pirates (RSA) 4-0 Disciples (Mad) (agg 4-0); Enugu Rangers (Nga) 1-1 US Zilimadjou (Com) (agg 2-1); MC Alger (Alg) 2-0 Watanga (Lbr) (agg 4-0); CBE (Eth) 1-1 SC Villa (Uga) (agg 3-2); Young Africans (Tan) 6-0 Vital'O (Bdi) (agg 10-0); APR (Rwa) 2-1 Azam (Tan) (agg 2-1); Red Arrows (Zam) 2-0 Nyasa Big Bullets (Mwi) (agg 3-2); Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 1-0 African Stars (Nam) (agg 1-1, *Jwaneng Galaxy win 6-5 on pens*); Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 3-0 Saint Louis Suns United (Sey) (agg 4-0); Belouizdad (Alg) 1-0 Leopards (Cgo) (agg 3-0); Raja Casablanca (Mar) 5-0 AS GNN (Nig) (agg 7-1); Teungueth (Sen) 1-1 Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) (agg 2-2, *Stade d'Abidjan win 5-4 on pens*); Al Merrikh (Sud) 2-0 Al Nasr (Lby) (agg 2-0); Gor Mahia (Ken) 5-1 Al Merreikh Bentiu (Ssd) (agg 5-2); Ferroviario da Beira (Moz) 0-0 Mbabane Swallows (Esw) (agg 0-1); Maniema Union (Cod) 0-0 Ngezi Platinum (Zim) (agg 0-0, *Maniema Union win 4-3 on pens*); Coton (Ben) 1-1 Douanes (Bfa) (agg 1-1, *Douanes win on away goals*); Samartex (Gha) 1-0 Victoria United (Cmr) (agg 2-0); US Monastir (Tun) 2-0 AS PSI (Cha) (agg 3-0); Djoliba (Mal) p-p Red Star de Bangui (Cta) (*Djoliba win by walkover*); ASKO Kara (Tog) 1-0 Deportivo Mongomo (Eqg) (agg 3-2); FC Nouadhibou (Mta) 1-1 Milo (Gui) (agg 1-1, *Milo win on away goals*); San Pedro (Civ) 1-0 Bo Rangers (Sle) (agg 2-1); Al Hilal (Sud) 1-1 Al Ahly Benghazi (Lby) (agg 2-1); AS FAR (Mar) 2-0 Remo Stars (Nga) (agg 3-2)

2024-25 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

First Qualifying Round

Aug 16-18: Jamus (Ssd) 0-1 Stade Tunisien (Tun); Kitara (Uga) 2-3 Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby); Horseed (Som) 0-0 Rukinzo (Bdi); El Kanemi Warriors (Nga) 1-1 Dadje (Ben); Union de Touarga (Mar) 0-0 RC Abidjan (Civ); Nsingizini Hotspurs (Esw) 0-3 Stellenbosch (RSA); Bravos do Maquis (Ang) 3-0 Coastal Union (Tan); Alize Fort (Com) 0-7 Black Bulls (Moz); Foresters (Sey) 1-1 Orapa United (Bot); CS Constantine (Alg) 2-0 Police FC (Rwa); ASC Kara (Tog) 2-2 AS FAN (Nig); Paynesville (Lbr) 4-0 Fovu Club (Cmr); Hafia (Gui) 1-1 Etoile Filante (Bfa); East End Lions (Sle) 0-1 ASC Jaraaf (Sen); Administration Police (Ken) 0-0 Ethiopian Coffee (Eth); Uhamiaji (Zan) 0-2 Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby); Dynamos (Zim) 1-0 ZESCO United (Zam); Nsoatreman (Gha) 3-0 Elect Sport (Cha)
Aug 21-25: Elgeco Plus (Mad) 1-1 Lunda Sul (Ang); 15 de Agosto (Eqg) 0-2 AS Otoho (Cod)
Aug 23-28: Etoile Filante (Bfa) 0-0 Hafia (Gui) (agg 1-1, *Etoile Filante win on away goals*); Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) 3-2 Kitara (Uga) (agg 6-4); Rukinzo (Bdi) 2-0 Horseed (Som) (agg 2-0); Dadje (Ben) 2-1 El Kanemi Warriors (Nga) (agg 3-2); RC Abidjan (Civ) 0-0 Union de Touarga (Mar) (agg 0-0, *RC Abidjan win 2-1 on pens*); Stade Tunisien (Tun) 4-0 Jamus (Ssd) (agg 5-0); Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 3-1 Uhamiaji (Zan) (agg 5-1); Stellenbosch (RSA) 5-0 Nsingizini Hotspurs (Esw) (agg 8-0); Black Bulls (Moz) 4-0 Alize Fort (Com) (agg 11-0); ZESCO United (Zam) 0-0 Dynamos (Zim) (agg 0-1); Elect Sport (Cha) 0-2 Nsoatreman (Gha) (agg 0-5); AS FAN (Nig) 0-2 ASC Kara (Tog) (agg 2-4); Fovu Club (Cmr) 0-1 Paynesville (Lbr) (agg 0-5); ASC Jaraaf (Sen) 3-0 East End Lions (Sle) (agg 4-0); Ethiopian Coffee (Eth) 0-1 Administration Police (Ken) (agg 0-1); Lunda Sul (Ang) 0-1 Elgeco Plus (Mad) (agg 1-1, *Lunda Sul win on away goals*); Coastal Union (Tan) 0-0 Bravos do Maquis (Ang) (agg 0-3); Orapa United (Bot) 2-0 Foresters (Sey) (agg 3-1); Police FC (Rwa) 1-2 CS Constantine (Alg) (agg 1-4); AS Otoho (Cod) 2-1 15 de Agosto (Eqg) (agg 4-1)

EGYPT

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahly (C)	34	27	4	3	75	28	85
Pyramids	34	24	7	3	62	27	79
Zamalek*	34	17	8	9	53	37	56
Al Masry	34	16	7	11	41	39	55
Modern Future	34	14	12	8	40	28	54
Smouha	34	15	9	10	39	35	54
ZED	34	13	12	9	48	35	51
Ceramica Cleopatra	34	12	10	12	51	42	46
ENPPI	34	11	12	11	38	37	45
Tala'ea El Gaish	34	10	12	12	30	40	42
Al Ittihad	34	9	14	11	30	42	41
El Gouna	34	9	12	13	32	44	39
National Bank of Egypt	34	9	9	16	46	45	36
Ismaily	34	7	12	15	33	43	33
Pharco	34	6	15	13	32	43	33
Baladiyyat Al Mahalla (R)	34	7	7	20	31	65	28
Al Mokawloon (R)	34	5	11	18	32	57	26
El Dakhleya (R)	34	3	11	20	17	43	20

*Deducted 3 points

CONCACAF

2024 LEAGUES CUP

Round of 32

Aug 7 – Los Angeles
Los Angeles FC (USA) 2 (Bouanga 11, Olivera 61)
Austin FC (USA) 0

Aug 7 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 0
UNAM Pumas (Mex) 2 (Huerta 36, Ruvalcaba 57)

Aug 8 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami (USA) 4 (Rojas 3, 59, Gomez 11, Suarez 20)
Toronto FC (Can) 3 (Insigne 15 pen, 41 pen, Allen 79 og)

Aug 8 – Austin
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Flores 65)
Pachuca (Mex) 0

Aug 8 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders (USA) 3 (Yeimar 4, Ragen 7, A. Roldan 45+4)
LA Galaxy (USA) 1 (Pec 83)

Aug 8 – San Jose
San Jose Earthquakes (USA) 5 (Yueill 5, Lopez 17, Ebobisse 29, 35, Marie 88)
Necaxa (Mex) 0

Aug 9 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati (USA) 1 (Orellano 11)
Santos Laguna (Mex) 1 (Lozano 5)
FC Cincinnati win 6-5 on pens

Aug 9 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 4 (Rossi 44, 57, Jones 77, Chambost 79)
Sporting Kansas City (USA) 0

Aug 9 – Washington D.C.
D.C. United (USA) 1 (Klich 74)
Mazatlan (Mex) 2 (Barcenas 34, Rubio 43)

Aug 9 – Foxborough
New England Revolution (USA) 1 (Wood 40)
New York City FC (USA) 1 (Rodriguez 35 pen)
New York City FC win 7-6 on pens

Aug 9 – Orlando
Orlando City (USA) 0
Cruz Azul (Mex) 0
Cruz Azul win 5-4 on pens

Aug 9 – Chester
Philadelphia Union (USA) 2 (Baribo 45+1, 90+6)
CF Montreal (Can) 0

Aug 9 – St Louis
St Louis City (USA) 3 (Teuchert 51, Hartel 83, Becher 88)
Portland Timbers (USA) 1 (Bravo 54)

Aug 9 – Houston
Toluca (Mex) 2 (Angulo 39, Lopez 90+6)
Houston Dynamo (USA) 2 (Ponce 41, Micael 62)
Toluca win 5-4 on pens

Aug 9 – Commerce City
Juarez (Mex) 2 (Zaldivar 18, Hurtado 71 pen)
Colorado Rapids (USA) 3 (Lewis 28, Mihailovic 45 pen, Harris 59)

Aug 9 – San Diego
America (Mex) 2 (E. Sanchez 20, Martin 73)
Atlas (Mex) 1 (R. Lozano 59)

Round of 16

Aug 12 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders (USA) 4 (Rothrock 32, Morris 58, 90+5 pen, Rusnak 71 pen)
UNAM Pumas (Mex) 0

Aug 13 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 3 (Ramirez 67, Rossi 69, 80)
Inter Miami (USA) 2 (Rojas 10, Gomez 62)

Aug 13 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati (USA) 2 (Bucha 66, Yedlin 80)
Philadelphia Union (USA) 4 (Uhre 51, Baribo 61, 81, Sullivan 84)

Aug 13 – Washington D.C.
Cruz Azul (Mex) 2 (Antuna 84, Ditta 90+1)
Mazatlan (Mex) 2 (Colula 40, Barcenas 45+1)
Mazatlan win 3-1 on pens

Aug 13 – Harrison
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Pizarro 18)
New York City FC (USA) 2 (Moralez 20, Rodriguez 65)

Aug 13 – Commerce City
Toluca (Mex) 1 (Paulinho 83)
Colorado Rapids (USA) 2 (Rafael Navarro 45, Yapi 90+6)

Aug 13 – Carson
America (Mex) 4 (B. Rodriguez 18, 86 pen, Valdes 79, Aguirre 90+8)
St Louis City (USA) 2 (Vassilev 49, Lowen 55 pen)

Aug 13 – Los Angeles
Los Angeles FC (USA) 4 (Olivera 18, Bouanga 45+5 pen, 66, Bogusz 61)
San Jose Earthquakes (USA) 1 (Lopez 41)

Quarter-Finals

Aug 17 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 1 (Hernandez 41)
New York City FC (USA) 1 (Martinez 1)
Columbus Crew win 4-3 on pens

Aug 17 – Chester
Philadelphia Union (USA) 1 (Uhre 45+3)
Mazatlan (Mex) 1 (Escoboza 59)
Philadelphia Union win 4-3 on pens

Aug 17 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders (USA) 0
Los Angeles FC (USA) 3 (Hollingshead 14, Kamara 25, Bouanga 53)

Aug 17 – Carson
America (Mex) 0
Colorado Rapids (USA) 0
Colorado Rapids win 9-8 on pens

Semi-Finals

Aug 21 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 3 (Rossi 12, 43, Hernandez 53)
Philadelphia Union (USA) 1 (Gazdag 32)

Aug 21 – Los Angeles
Los Angeles FC (USA) 4 (Bogusz 42, Kamara 45, Bouanga 59, O'Brien 75)
Colorado Rapids (USA) 0

Third Place Play-Off

Aug 25 – Chester
Philadelphia Union (USA) 2 (Baribo 41, 44)
Colorado Rapids (USA) 2 (Harris 38, Larraz 49)
Colorado Rapids win 3-1 on pens

Final

Aug 25 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 3 (Hernandez 45, 90+2, Russell-Rowe 90+4)
Los Angeles FC (USA) 1 (Giroud 57)

2024 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Group Stage

Group A

Aug 13-15: Motagua (Hon) 4-1 Tauro (Pan); San Francisco (Pan) 0-0 Diriangen (Nca)
Aug 22: Tauro (Pan) 1-2 Diriangen (Nca); San Francisco (Pan) 0-1 Herediano (Crc)
Aug 28: Tauro (Pan) 2-1 San Francisco (Pan); Herediano (Crc) 1-1 Motagua (Hon)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Herediano (Q)	4	3	1	0	4	1	10
Motagua (Q)	4	2	1	1	9	6	7
Diriangen	4	2	1	1	4	3	7
Tauro	4	1	0	3	4	8	3
San Francisco	4	0	1	3	3	6	1

Group B

Aug 13-14: Alianza (Slv) 5-2 Luis Angel Firpo (Slv); Comunicaciones (Gua) 2-1 Marathon (Hon)
Aug 20-21: Alianza (Slv) 1-2 Alajuelense (Crc); Marathon (Hon) 1-0 Luis Angel Firpo (Slv)
Aug 27: Marathon (Hon) 1-0 Alianza (Slv); Alajuelense (Crc) 2-1 Comunicaciones (Gua)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alajuelense (Q)	4	4	0	0	11	6	12
Comunicaciones (Q)	4	2	1	1	5	4	7
Marathon	4	2	0	2	4	5	6
Alianza	4	1	0	3	6	6	3
Luis Angel Firpo	4	0	1	3	6	11	1

Group C

Aug 13-14: Antigua (Gua) 2-1 Independiente (Pan); Aguila (Slv) 5-1 Port Layola (Blz)
Aug 21-22: Independiente (Pan) 1-0 Port Layola (Blz); Aguila (Slv) 2-0 Olimpia (Hon)
Aug 29: Independiente (Pan) 0-3 Aguila (Slv); Olimpia (Hon) 1-1 Antigua (Gua)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aguila (Q)	4	3	1	0	10	1	10
Antigua (Q)	4	2	2	0	7	3	8
Olimpia	4	2	1	1	10	4	7
Independiente	4	1	0	3	2	8	3
Port Layola	4	0	0	4	3	16	0

Group D

Aug 14-15: Real Esteli (Nca) 3-0 Managua (Nca); Municipal (Gua) 3-1 Guanacasteca (Crc)
Aug 20-21: Real Esteli (Nca) 2-1 Saprissa (Crc); Guanacasteca (Crc) 1-1 Managua (Nca)
Aug 29: Guanacasteca (Crc) 1-0 Real Esteli (Nca); Saprissa (Crc) 1-0 Municipal (Gua)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saprissa (Q)	4	3	0	1	10	4	9
Real Esteli (Q)	4	2	1	1	6	3	7
Municipal	4	1	1	2	4	4	4
Managua	4	1	1	2	4	7	4
Guanacasteca	4	1	1	2	3	9	4

2024 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

Group Stage

Group A

Aug 20-22: Mount Pleasant (Jam) 0-2 Cavalier (Jam); Real Hope 1-1 Police (Tri)
Aug 27-29: Arnett Gardens (Jam) 1-2 Mount Pleasant (Jam); Cavalier (Jam) 4-1 Police (Tri)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cavalier	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Mount Pleasant	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Real Hope	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Police	2	0	1	1	2	5	1
Arnett Gardens	1	0	0	1	1	2	0

Group B

Aug 21-22: Cibao (Dom) 0-0 Moca (Dom); Ouanaminthe (Hai) 1-1 Port of Spain (Tri)
Aug 27-28: Moca (Dom) 3-2 Port of Spain (Tri); Grenades (Atg) 1-2 Cibao (Dom)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Moca	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Cibao	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Ouanaminthe	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Port of Spain	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Grenades	1	0	0	1	1	2	0

2024 CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Semi-Finals

July 10:
Pacific 0-1 Vancouver Whitecaps;
Forge 2-1 Toronto FC
Aug 27:
Vancouver Whitecaps 1-0 Pacific (agg 2-0);
Toronto FC 1-0 Forge
(agg 2-2, *Toronto FC win on away goals*)

GUYANA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guyana Defence Force (C)	18	16	2	0	72	10	50
Slingerz	18	14	4	0	76	10	46
Police	18	13	1	4	51	22	40
Western Tigers	18	9	1	8	58	36	28
Santos	18	9	1	8	39	24	28
Den Amstel	18	5	5	8	20	32	20
Fruta Conquerors	18	5	1	12	20	43	16
Monedderlust	18	4	4	10	18	60	16
Ann's Grove	18	4	2	12	19	59	14
Buxton United (R)	18	0	1	17	9	86	1

SINT MAARTEN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
SCSA Eagles (C)	12	10	2	0	62	12	32
Belvedere	12	7	0	5	34	28	21
758 Boyz	12	5	2	5	40	20	17
Soualiga	12	0	0	12	4	80	0

SAINT KITTS & NEVIS

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Peters*	18	10	5	3	40	23	35
Cayon*	18	9	7	2	34	16	34
Old Road Jets United*	18	8	8	2	38	14	32
St Pauls United*	18	9	4	5	31	20	31
Village Superstars	18	8	6	4	35	23	30
Conaree	18	6	5	7	24	24	23
Bath United	18	7	2	9	17	20	23
Newtown United** (R)	18	7	2	9	20	30	23
Garden Hotspurs (R)	18	3	7	8	19	28	16
Trafalgar Southstars (R)	18	0	0	18	14	74	0

**Advance to championship round*
***Lost promotion-relegation play-off 2-1 to Mantab United*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Pauls United*	3	2	1	0	8	4	7
St Peters*	3	1	2	0	5	4	5
Canyon	3	1	1	1	5	4	4
Old Road Jets United	3	0	0	3	5	11	0

**Advance to final*

Final

Aug 12: St Pauls United 3-0 St Peters
Aug 16: St Peters 0-2 St Pauls United (agg 0-5)

SURINAME

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Transvaal*	18	12	4	2	45	10	40
Robinhood*	18	11	7	0	50	17	40
Voorwaarts*	18	10	6	2	23	9	36
Inter Moengotapoe*	18	10	4	4	44	25	34
Notch	18	9	7	2	34	15	34
PVV	18	8	2	8	28	25	26
Flora	18	5	1	12	20	45	16
Broki	18	3	1	14	23	54	10
Inter Wanica	18	2	3	13	19	52	9
Leo Victor (R)	18	2	1	15	13	47	7

**Advance to finals stage*

Finals Stage

Semi-Finals

Aug 10-11:
Transvaal 1-0 Inter Moengotapoe;
Robinhood 2-0 Voorwaarts
Aug 18-19:
Voorwaarts 0-2 Robinhood (agg 0-4);
Inter Moengotapoe 0-2 Transvaal (agg 0-3)

Final

Aug 24: Transvaal 0-2 Robinhood

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GROUP EDITOR
Stephen Fishlock

MANAGING EDITOR
Jamie Evans

DIGITAL MANAGING EDITOR
Jared Tinslay

DESIGN
Sean Phillips, atg-media.com

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EDITORIAL
Kelsey Media, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIP
Talk Media Ltd: Russell Bedford
Tel. 01732 445328
Email: russell@talk-media.uk

AD PRODUCTION MANAGER
Talk Media Ltd: Nick Bond
Tel. 01732 445325
Email: nick@talk-media.uk

PUBLISHER Steve Brown
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CONSUMER ADVERTISING Oswin Grady
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR Gill Lambert
PRINT PRODUCTION MANAGER
Georgina Harris
PRINT PRODUCTION CONTROLLERS
Hayley Brown & Kelly Orriss

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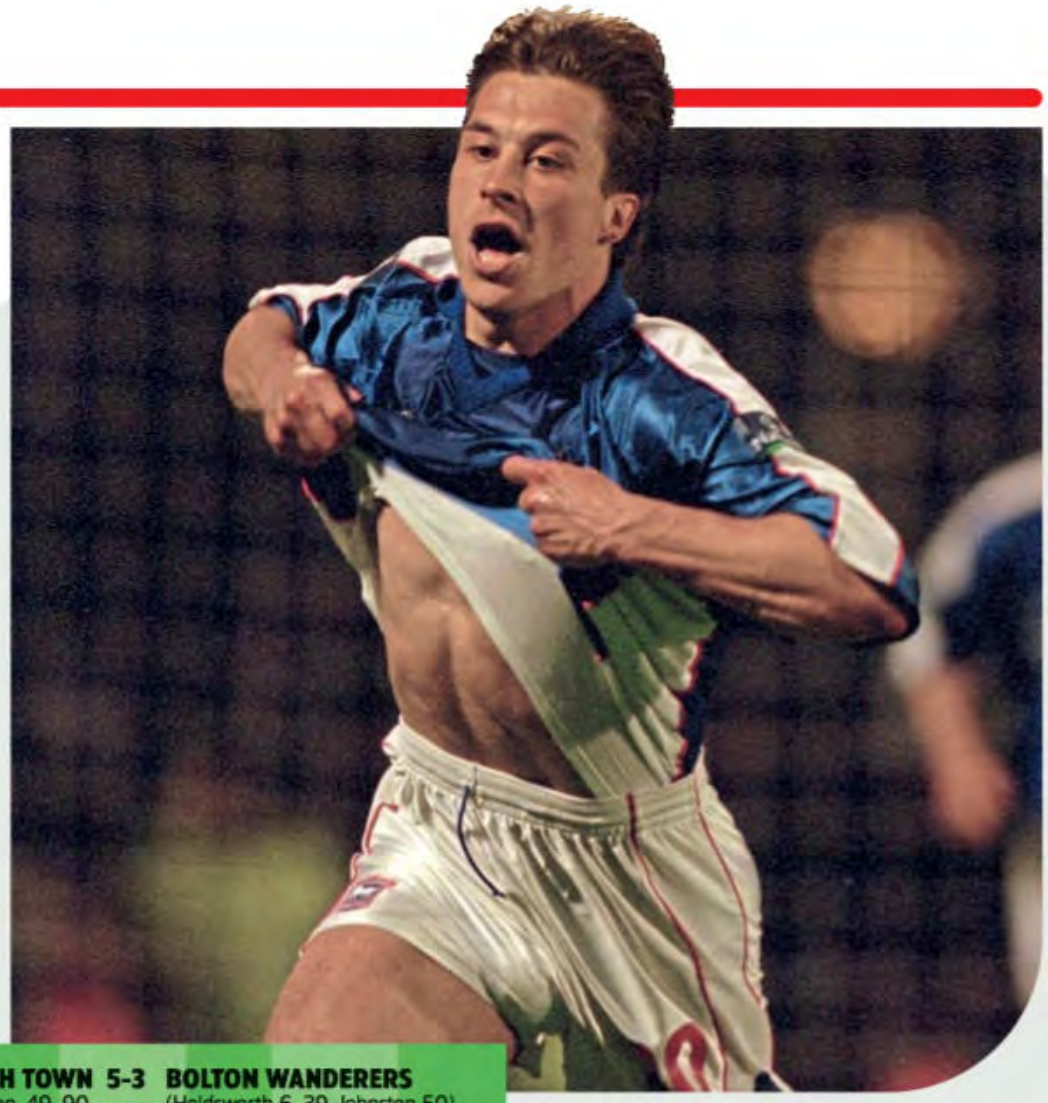
Martijn Reuser

Ipswich Town v Bolton Wanderers

1999-2000 Division One play-off semi-final second leg

Earlier this year, Ipswich won promotion to the Premier League for the first time since winning the play-offs in 2000. Their semi-final clash with Bolton that season was a classic – and the Tractor Boys' Dutch winger Reuser was at the heart of it...



Ipswich hero...Reuser celebrates scoring in the play-off semis

"I joined Ipswich on loan from Ajax in March, just a couple of months before this game. The move happened quickly. When George Burley called and said: 'We need you to help us get promoted to the Premier League', I decided to go. Two days later, I was on the plane.

Ipswich had been trying to win promotion for a few years. Once I got there, the players, the fans and the press made me aware of how important it was. There was a big togetherness and a determination to get it right that season.

I expected to start more games during that loan spell, but George saw me as a player who could come off the bench and make a difference. Sometimes that was difficult to accept because I was playing quite well, but the team was always the most important thing.

After drawing the first leg 2-2, we were full of confidence going into the second leg at home. There was a buzz around the place. The atmosphere was electric. But Bolton were stronger than I thought and they gave us a really tough game. Sam Allardyce had prepared them well.

There was a lot of excitement. So much happened during the game and we went through many different emotions. We fell behind three times but always came back.

I remember the referee getting a lot of stick from their players for some of the decisions that went our way. We got three penalties that night and a couple of them were a bit harsh. It's hard when you feel like the referee is against you, but they were complaining about him all the time, which might have affected their concentration.

We were 3-2 down when I came on in the second half. I just wanted to make an impact and create some chances. I tried my best, but it was difficult. With a few minutes to go, I had my doubts.

The good thing about that team was that someone would always stand up in important moments. This time it was Jim Magilton, who equalised in the dying seconds to complete his hat-trick. Tony Mowbray had gone up front and won the header to set him up. The relief when that goal went in was unbelievable.

Bolton were a man down, which helped, but we were the better team in extra-time. We got another penalty, which Jamie Clapham scored, and their players went crazy again. Then Robbie Elliott was sent off for a foul on me, so we were playing against nine men.

Late on, in the second half of extra-time, we had to defend as Bolton pushed forward. I had a good connection with Richard Naylor, who used his strength to hold the ball up well and then played it through to me.

I went one-on-one with their keeper, Jussi Jaaskelainen. I wanted to get the ball onto my right foot but that didn't work so I had to go with my left instead. I shot across goal and it went into the top corner. The eruption of energy and enthusiasm I felt in that moment was indescribable – we knew we were going to Wembley.

Our supporters invaded the pitch at full-time, which was amazing. It's the sort of thing you see on television, but when you actually get to experience it you feel overwhelmed. It took us a while to get back to the dressing room. Matt Holland was basically naked by then because the fans had taken all his kit!

It's easy to say when something ends positively, but I always felt we were going to get promoted. Most of that squad had never played in the Premier League before so it was a new adventure for us. A new chapter in our own careers, and also for Ipswich. It brought a lot of attention to the club and the town. After 22 years away, I'm excited to see them back again."

> It took us a while to get back to the dressing room. Matt Holland was basically naked by then because the fans had taken all his kit

Decisive...Reuser slides home his finish

Interview by Sean Cole

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